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Frost (Prologue and Allegiances)

[image]

Prologue

There was nothing around the two cats but a forest of ice. Every barren tree was coated with it, turning the ordinary woods into something otherworldly as the branches glistened in the sunlight. It was as beautiful as it was cruel and unforgiving.

The frost left nothing untouched, a constant reminder of the indiscriminate brutality of nature, and the two cats were certainly not spared from the savagery.

The she-cat's normally thick, fluffy white coat was ragged. The once beautiful grey point coloration on her face, tail, and paws appeared dull and dirty. Her ribs jutted out from under her thin coat, and her blue eyes were sunken deeply into her skull.

"Please, we need your help," the grey-and-white she-cat begged.

She took a step towards a tom with long, white fur, the frozen grass crinkling under her paws like glass. The tom blinked his green eyes and tilted his head to the side.

"Why?" he asked with a yawn, his breath leaving a foggy trail through the air.

"'Why?'" the grey-and-white she-cat echoed incredulously, her eyes widening. "We're starving!"

The white tom swept a cursory gaze over the she-cat's thin form, but then he twitched his whiskers, appearing disinterested.

"That's not my problem, May," the white tom meowed.

May's blue gaze narrowed in outrage.

"What do you mean, *not your problem?*" she hissed through her fangs.

"This has been one of the hardest leaf-bares in memory," the white tom meowed, his brow furrowing. "We're *all* hungry. Rumor is that ThunderClan has barely any prey left at all."

"I don't care about ThunderClan," May said, shaking her ears in confusion.

"Well neither do I," the white tom said with a snort. "Mangy mice-munchers, all of them."

May's tail twitched.

"Don't change the subject!" she hissed.

The white tom heaved a sigh.

"Look, May," he said. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do for you."

For a moment, May could do nothing but stare at him in shock as his words sunk in.

"If you do nothing, then I will die," May said with a low growl, her tail lashing behind her. "You do realize that, don't you?"

The white tom was quiet, glaring at her with his sharp green eyes. Pain clawed inside of May's chest at how distant his gaze looked.

"I will die and so will Frost. *Your own kit, Paledusk!* She's the only one left!" May snarled, her voice breaking over the last few words.

Paledusk was still silent. He did not even give a tail twitch to betray his thoughts. The silence stretched on between them, and May felt a heavy weight sinking in her belly.

"I can't believe you," she whispered, clenching her jaw.

She flattened her bristling fur with difficulty. There was no point to it. He was larger than her, stronger, and better fed. It wasn't like she

could fight him anyway. Paledusk rose to his paws to pad over to her.

"I'm sorry May. I really am," Paledusk meowed in his deep voice. "Things are just really hard in camp right now. Prey is scarce. The deputy is ill... SkyClan can't spare food for two more mouths to feed."

Fury rushed through May at his weak excuses.

"And, you can't let your precious clan-mates know that you fathered kits with a rogue!" she spat.

Paledusk blinked, his face expressionless.

"The Clan must come first, May," he rumbled.

"Mouse-dung!" May hissed.

"Come on, don't be like that," Paledusk meowed, coming over to May to press his pelt against her's.

"I thought you loved me!" May cried, pulling herself away from him and digging her claws into the frozen ground.

Paledusk was silent again, his green eyes as cold as the ice around them.

"I thought I did once too," he said.

May's eyes narrowed to furious slits.

"The blood of your children is on your paws," she said, her voice low.

"So be it," Paledusk meowed, turning away. "I won't lose sleep over the death of some kits I've never met."

"Go eat deathberries, Paledusk," May spat, her paws trembling with anger and her chest aching as her heart shattered beneath her ribs.

Paledusk's tufted ears pricked, and he stopped walking.

"You better run, May," Paledusk growled quietly from over his shoulder. "A patrol is coming."

May froze in place. She could hear the distant sounds of cats pushing their way through the bushes, then some yowls as they picked up an unfamiliar scent.

Her scent.

"A trespasser!" The faint cry drifted over to her.

Paledusk whipped around, facing May again.

"She's over here!" Paledusk shouted, baring his teeth at May. "It's a rogue."

May's fur bristled as panic surged through her.

"What are you doing?!" she spat, cowering down and backing away from him.

She could hear the SkyClan patrol approaching, crashing through the undergrowth as they sprinted closer.

"Where are you Paledusk?" someone on the patrol cried.

Paledusk curled his lip up at May in an ugly snarl. With a battle-cry, he sprung at her, flashing a paw out to score his claws through May's flesh.

May cried out as searing pain ripped down her shoulder, then she turned tail and took off.

Her legs shook as she ran, panting and bleeding. But, she couldn't slow. She could hear Paledusk and the rest of the SkyClan patrol behind her, only a few tail-lengths away. Finally, she reached the scent markers, shooting over them and into the unclaimed territory beyond.

"Yeah, stay out, you prey-stealer!" a SkyClan cat shouted from behind her.

"Mangy rogue!" another jeered.

"If I see your face around here again, I'll rip your throat out," Paledusk snarled.

May ran, her head bowed and blood streaming down her side.

This forest was unfamiliar. Towering pine trees framed the world around May. She could still make out the green color of their needles beneath the layer of ice. The color seemed strange; out of place for winter. It didn't seem possible that these trees could still be alive despite the cold.

May felt like she was barely clinging to life herself. Her paws were numb and aching, and her shoulder wound was still dripping blood. But, May had a tiny, fluffy creamy-white kit at her paws. May was all she had in this world, and she was all May had left too. So, the she-cat silently clenched her jaw and continued onwards. No matter what, she had to keep going for her.

"I'm tired, Mama," the tiny kit squeaked, teetering on unsteady legs.

"I know, baby. Just a bit further," May meowed.

It was hard to encourage her daughter when she was so exhausted herself. Every step she took felt like a league. Her legs trembled and her breath was laborious like she had been running for days.

"Are we going to see Daddy?" the tiny kit said, stumbling along beside her.

"No we aren't," May said, closing her eyes briefly as burning anger and pain washed over her. "Your dad is..."

May glanced down at her kit and felt the words get stuck in her throat. Her kit blinked up at her with huge pale blue eyes. May could see the faintest hint of grey on her kit's nose. She knew it would darken in these coming moons, along with the fur on her tail and paws to the same grey on May's face, tail, and feet.

If she made it through these moons.

Her kit looked skeletal, with ribs that poked out under her downy, soft kit-fur and eyes that seemed much too big for her sharp, bony face, and teetering stick-thin legs.

"Don't talk," May murmured, bending her head to nudge her kit forward with her nose. "Save your strength for walking."

"But, I don't want to walk," the kit cried. "I'm so hungry Mama. And, cold. I want to sleep."

A rush of panic flashed through May.

"You can't sleep!" May said, whirling on her kit.

Her kit blinked hard, stumbling backwards and onto her haunches in surprise. Her kit let out a faint whimpering cry, which hurt May more than her aching paws, bleeding wounds, or the pangs of hunger in her belly combined.

"I'm sorry, Frost. I'm so sorry," May cried, wrapping herself around her kit.

She pressed her thin coat to Frost, trying to offer her as much protection from the cold wind as she could. Frost nuzzled into her fur, and May pressed her muzzle to Frost's head. Underneath the sharp bite of ice and snow, she could still scent Frost's sweet kit-smell. May took a deep, trembling breath of it and held it in her lungs. She didn't want to breathe out, in fear that this could be the last time she ever smelt that sweetness.

"You can't sleep, baby. If you sleep, you might not wake up," May whispered, her shoulders shaking as she forced the words out.

"Like Rain and Snow?" Frost whispered into May's pelt.

May trembled in grief. She screwed her eyes shut, thinking of Frost's brothers— her dead sons. She saw their tiny, stiff forms in her mind. Killed by hunger and the cold before their lives could even properly begin.

"Yes, Frost," May whispered.

"Don't worry, Mama," Frost mewed, peering up at her. "I'll never leave you."

"Sometimes you don't have a choice, baby," May whispered, her voice choked up as she stroked Frost's fur with her tail.

"I smell trespassers!" a voice cried from nearby, causing May's head to jerk up in fear.

May looked over and saw a patrol of cats stride out of the shadows of the pine trees. A light brown tabby tom with long legs was at its head. A silver tom dappled with black spots and stripes was at his side. Behind him was a ginger she-cat and a smaller black tom. May didn't even rise from the ground to meet them. She didn't have the strength left in her body. Instead, she just wrapped her tail around Frost, hiding her from sight.

"Get out of here, rogue!" the dappled silver tom snarled, looming over May.

May cowered down, tucking her tail more tightly around her kit.

"Put your claws away, Swoopstrike. Can't you see she's not a threat?" the light brown tabby said to him, his voice mild. "She's all bones and fur."

"She's trespassing!" Swoopstrike protested, but he obeyed, taking a step back and sheathing his claws.

May blinked.

"...I know I'm on ShadowClan territory," she broke in, her voice hoarse.

"You do?" the light brown tabby said in surprise, turning away from Swoopstrike.

"I came here because I need your help. Please," May begged.

"You don't seem to be in good shape," the light brown tabby

commented, gaze flickering over her ragged pelt. "But, why have you come to ShadowClan for help?"

"I—I thought ShadowClan might take me in," May stammered.

"We don't take in strays," Swoopstrike said, his tail tip twitching.

May's gut twisted in dread as she gazed up at them with wide blue eyes. Were all clan-cats so heartless? Would ShadowClan drive her away too?

"Please," May begged again. "I have a kit."

She moved her tail to reveal Frost by her side. During the few moments that the ShadowClan patrol had appeared, her exhausted kit had fallen asleep on her flank. She twitched faintly as May touched her nose to her head to make sure she was still breathing.

"She won't make it much longer. Her litter-mates are already dead," May meowed, her voice pleading. "I can't find food; I don't have the milk to feed her. I can't lose her too."

The ginger she-cat on the patrol padded up to May and Frost. May tensed as she approached, but she didn't move away. Her gaze was full of sorrow and empathy, which made May sense that she was a mother too. The she-cat gently touched her nose to Frost's side.

"The poor thing," she whispered, her green eyes round with pity.

The ginger cat straightened, turning to the light brown tabby tom.

"We have to help them, Sedgestar," she meowed. "They won't last two more sunrises on their own."

"Sedge*star?"* May meowed, her eyes widening as she turned back to the tabby tom. "You're ShadowClan's leader?"

"...You seem to know an awful lot about our customs for a rogue," Sedgestar meowed, his voice taking on a wary edge.

"Her father is a clan cat," May murmured, nodding towards Frost as her heart sunk with shame and betrayal at the thought of Paledusk.

"He taught me some things... like how all the leaders' names end in 'star.'"

"A clan cat? A ShadowClan cat?" Sedgestar asked, tensing as his amber eyes flashed.

"No," May meowed quietly, her ears flattening. "SkyClan."

"Ah," Sedgestar said, relaxing slightly. "Who?"

May was silent, her jaw clenching.

She couldn't make herself say his name.

Even though at this moment, May would've loved to claw Paledusk's lying pelt off, she couldn't deny the fact that a part of her still loved him, and she *hated* herself for it. She hated that she couldn't out him to ShadowClan's leader without a second thought.

Paledusk had told her that the Clans were enemies, always fighting with each other. What kind of pain and destruction would it cause, if Sedgestar found out Paledusk broke the rules of the Clans? Would it get him killed? Would ShadowClan and SkyClan fight over it?

"Why haven't you gone to him in SkyClan?" Sedgestar asked, dropping the question for the moment.

May lashed her tail.

"They won't have us. Her father is who did this to me," May muttered darkly, nodding towards the wound on her shoulder.

Sedgestar took a few steps towards her to get a better look at the cuts. May flinched away as he approached, half expecting him to hurt her as Paledusk had, but he didn't lay a paw on her.

"Don't worry," Sedgestar growled, locking his gaze with May's after glancing at her wound. "ShadowClan is not so dishonorable. You and your kit are welcome to stay with us for now. We will take you to our camp. There you will have a warm nest and fresh-kill."

May felt a surge of relief in her chest that shook her down to her

bones.

Frost would be alright. Her last kit would survive.

May's throat closed up in emotion.

"Thank you, Sedgestar," May gasped, stumbling to her feet. "I will do whatever it takes to make this up to you."

Frost's eyes flickered open, and she mewed weakly as her mother's warm side against her vanished. A sudden surge of weakness rushed over May, and she swayed on her paws, almost falling over before Sedgestar stepped in, allowing her to steady herself on his side.

"It is our pleasure...?" Sedgestar meowed, blinking at her questioningly.

"May," May said.

"May," Sedgestar repeated with a nod, his amber eyes kind. "Emberflower, will you carry the kit?"

The ginger she-cat scooped up the kit, gently securing her scruff in her jaws.

"She's so light," Emberflower gasped, her brow furrowing in concern.

Sedgestar glanced over at the tiny kit in Emberflower's mouth.

"And she is?" he asked.

"Frost," May said. "Her name is Frost."

The Ancient Clans

Allegiances:

Cats outside of Clans:

May— a thin, fluffy grey-point she-cat with blue eyes (former mate:

Paledusk. Mother of Frostkit)

ShadowClan:

Leader: Sedgestar— a light brown, long legged, tabby tom with amber eyes (mate: Emberflower)

Deputy: Grovepelt— a pale brown tom with a greying muzzle and green eyes

Medicine cat: Clearstream— a fluffy light grey tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice: Elmclaw— a dark tabby tom with green eyes

Warriors: Emberflower— a ginger she-cat with green eyes (mate: Sedgestar)

Apprentice: Beepaw— a black tom

Darkpelt— a black tom (mate: Larkfoot)

Apprentice: Hootpaw— a grey tom

Weaseltail— a brown tabby and white tom with amber eyes and a long tail (mate: Redclaw)

Kestrelmoon— a pale cream tom (mate: Amberberry)

Dustleap—a light ginger tom

Apprentice: Thornpaw— a brown tabby tom

Dawntail— a fluffy grey and white she-cat

Marshnose— a brown tabby tom with a white muzzle

Fogfur— a fluffy grey tom with green eyes

Snakeeyes— a sleek white she-cat with a blue eye and a green eye (mate: Rowanheart)

Apprentice: Leafpaw— a grey tabby she-cat

Swoopstrike— a dappled silver tabby tom with green eyes

Dappledpelt— a tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Rowanheart— a ginger tom (mate: Snakeeyes)

Queens: Larkfoot— a pale tabby she-cat (mate: Darkpelt. Dampkit — a black tom, Dewkit— a grey she-cat)

Redclaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat with dark ginger patches and green eyes (mate: Weaseltail. Pinekit— a black she-cat with amber eyes, Poolkit— a black and white tom with amber eyes, Autumnkit — dark ginger and white tom with amber eyes.)

Amberberry— a golden she-cat (mate: Krestrelmoon. Mosskit— a pale cream she-cat, Murmurkit— a pale golden she-cat)

Adopted Kit: Frostkit— a fluffy tabby grey-point she-cat with tufted ears, blue eyes, and white paws (Raised communally by the Queens.)

Elders: Treefur— a dark brown tom with poor eyesight

Greytail— a grey she-cat

Flymask— a black and white tom

SkyClan:

Leader: Fennelstar— a pale brown tom with bushy fur

Deputy: Robinsong— a tortoiseshell she-cat with a ginger belly.

Medicine cat: Swallowfur— a blue-grey she-cat

Warriors: Paledusk— a sleek, long-furred white tom with tufted ears and green eyes

Sparrowheart— a dappled brown tabby she-cat

Apprentice: Yewpaw— a dark brown tabby tom

Cloudleap— a long legged grey and white tom

Brokenbranch— a ginger tom with a bend in his tail

Mapleflight— a dark ginger tom

Stormfang— a grey tom

Poppyfur— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Suneyes— a grey she-cat with bright amber eyes

Queens: Doepelt— a light brown tabby she-cat (Larchkit— a light brown tabby she-cat, Aspenkit— a grey she-cat, Oakkit— a grey tabby and white tom)

Elders: Birdstrike— a heavily scarred, pale grey and white she-cat

RiverClan:

Leader: Willowstar— a grey tabby, sleek furred she-cat

Deputy: Perchpelt— a brown tabby tom

Medicine cat: Pebblestripe— a dark grey tabby tom

Warriors: Violetfur— a black she-cat

Stoneripple— a grey tabby tom

Apprentice: Turtlepaw— a brown and white tom

Waterwhisker— a fluffy ginger and white she-cat

Heronfur— a brown tabby tom

Ospreyscar— a brown and white tom with a long scar down his side

Wavepelt— a grey she-cat with long, wavy fur

Rainspot— a dappled black and white she-cat

Apprentice: Murkpaw— a black tom

Queens: Reedheart— a tortoiseshell she-cat (Otterkit— a dark

brown she-cat, Hailkit— a white and grey she-cat)

Sandpelt— a pale ginger she-cat

Elders: Fishtail— a white and grey tom with a long tail

Sleekclaw— a nearly blind, once beautiful tabby she-cat

ThunderClan:

Leader: Morningstar— a pale grey tom

Deputy: Leafstorm— a ginger she-cat with green eyes

Medicine cat: Pearnose— a dark brown tabby she-cat

Apprentice: Fallowpaw— a pale brown and white tom

Warriors: Pineclaw— a dark brown tom with a big rip in one ear

Beechfur— a brown tabby tom

Apprentice: Rockpaw— a grey tom

Fernclaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Acornear— a brown tom

Apprentice: Juniperpaw— a grey and cream tortoiseshell she-cat

Nettlepelt— a dark grey she-cat with spiky fur

Apprentice: Foxpaw— a ginger she-cat

Birchtail— a grey and white tom

Brambledapple— a tabby and white she-cat

Queens: None

Elders: Mothwhisker— a brown tom with a lot of patchy, greying fur

WindClan:

Leader: Rabbitstar— a light ginger tom with large ears

Deputy: Wheatfur— a golden tabby she-cat

Medicine cat: Falconpelt— a brown tabby tom

Warriors: Tumblefox— a ginger tom

Apprentice: Eaglepaw— a golden-brown tom

Slatepelt— a grey she-cat

Runningfoot— a dark tabby tom

Oatbreeze— a tortoiseshell and white she-cat

Volefur— a pale grey tom

Pounceclaw— a black tom

Nighteyes— a black and white she-cat with blue eyes

Stormcloud— a grey tabby and white tom

Queens: Thrushleap— a tan tabby she-cat (mate to Rabbitstar)

Elders: Harepelt— a brown tom with a grey muzzle

Deerdash— a long-legged tabby she-cat

Author's Note: To give a little bit of context for this story, it takes place following the events of one of the stories from the field guide, "Battles of The Clans" (which I headcanon to take place approximately 15 years before Cloudstar's born in SkyClan.) Just to give a quick re-cap, in that story the clans are going through a horrible winter, and Morningstar, ThunderClan's leader begs the other clan-leaders for food, and they refuse him. Then rather than let ThunderClan starve, Morningstar goes to battle with WindClan. So, the leaders of the Clans in this story, as well as some ThunderClan characters like Leafstorm, Pearnose, and

Mothwhisker are canon characters, but practically everyone else are my OC's. I hope you enjoy!

Welcome to ShadowClan (Book 1)

Book One: Frozen Pines

Frost blinked awake, nestled safe and warm in a soft, mossy nest in the nursery of the ShadowClan camp.

The nursery under the thorn bush was crowded with queens and kits despite the bitter leaf-bare that locked the forest in its jaws. There were three ShadowClan queens—Larkfoot and her five moon old kits Dampkit and Dewkit. Amberberry with her newborns, Mosskit and Murmurkit. And, Redclaw with her kits Pinekit, Poolkit, and Autumnkit, who were around a moon and a half old, only a few sunrises older than Frost.

Frost and her mother had only been in the nursery for a few sunrises, but Frost was already feeling much better. Her paws no longer trembled when she stood, and her skin no longer ached with the cold. She was warm now, and her belly was full for the first time that she could remember. Her mother also had been given fresh-kill to eat, and she shared some small pieces with Frost.

The queens all seemed nice enough, although Frost had barely left her mother's side since they got there, and so she hadn't really spoken to them. Although, Redclaw, the queen with black fur and bright red patches, had shared some milk with Frost since May's milk hadn't come back in yet.

The stranger cat that Frost saw the most, out of even the other queens, was a cat named Clearstream, the one the others called "medicine cat." Frost didn't understand a lot of the words some of the other cats used. But, she didn't like this "medicine cat." Clearstream was soft spoken with gentle blue eyes, but she kept making Frost and her mother eat these terrible tasting leaves.

Frost sighed and wrinkled her nose up at the thought. She wondered if Clearstream or her "apprentice" -*another strange word*- Elmclaw would come by with more leaves today. She hoped not.

Frost went to snuggle into her mother's side but quickly recoiled with surprise when she felt that her mother's fur was cold. Frost's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Mama?" Frost peeped, pressing a paw to her mother's flank.

May did not stir. She remained curled up, her eyes shut and her fluffy tail covering her muzzle. Her face looked calm.

"Mama?" Frost called a bit louder, trying to wake her.

Redclaw stirred in her nest, her three kits still sleeping by her belly.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Frost didn't reply, instead she continued to prod at her mother with her paw, trying to rouse her.

"Oh no," Redclaw muttered. "Larkfoot!"

Larkfoot, a pale tabby queen, blinked awake.

"Go get Clearstream!" Redclaw meowed.

Larkfoot's eyes widened as she shot one look at May and Frost, then she got to her paws and dashed out of the den.

"Where are you going?" Dewkit meowed, blinking awake as her mother bounded out of the nursery.

Frost hardly noticed Larkfoot leave. She couldn't focus on anything but the mounting concern in her belly. What was happening to her mother?

Only a few moments later, Larkfoot was back, with Clearstream in tow, along with Elmclaw and Sedgestar. Frost recoiled at the sight of the grey tabby, her eyes widening as the already crowded nursery was suddenly filled to the brim with cats.

Clearstream's brow was furrowed, her eyes concerned.

"...She was so weak when she got here. She wasn't improving much, but I thought she could still pull through..." Clearstream was meowing, walking up to May.

Frost crouched down, flattening herself against the moss of the nest as her eyes flashed with confusion and fear.

Clearstream bent down and pressed her ear to May's chest. Then she straightened, sadly shaking her head.

"A shame," Sedgestar said in his deep meow. "I saw a warrior's spirit in her."

Sedgestar nodded towards the exit of the den.

"Let's take her body out," he meowed.

Frost's eyes widened in terror as Elmclaw and Clearstream flanked May and lifted her. May slouched between them, her head lolling as the medicine cats picked her up from the nest, heading towards the entrance of the nursery.

"Wait!" Frost meowed, suddenly finding her voice as she scrambled to her paws.

"Where are you taking her? Stop!" Frost cried as they walked May outside.

"Stay here, little one," Elmclaw rumbled, flashing her a glance of his sharp green eyes over his shoulder.

"Come here, Frostkit," Redclaw called softly, getting to her paws.

"My name is Frost!" Frost meowed, stumbling after May.

"Mama!" Frost yowled.

Agony swelled in Frost's chest. May didn't even glance back once as she was taken away, although the two queens, Amberberry and Larkfoot, gazed at Frost with expressions creased with pity. The kits

Dampkit and Dewkit stared too, their eyes impossibly big and round, but the rest of the kits remained sleeping.

Redclaw padded over to Frost, wrapping her tail around her to stop her from following her mother.

"Mama!" Frost wailed, trying to scramble away from her.

"Shh, she's gone," Redclaw meowed, reaching a paw out to block Frost.

Frost froze at her words, the pain in her chest all at once changing into numb shock.

It couldn't be true. Her mother couldn't be gone like Rain and Snow. Frost needed her... She couldn't've left her alone.

"Mama..." Frost repeated weakly.

"It'll be okay little one," Redclaw said softly, pulling Frost close again.

Frost was silent. She stood still, quiet and stiff as Redclaw nuzzled her head, and Redclaw's unfamiliar fur and scent enveloped her.

"I just don't understand why we have to play with *her!"* Autumnkit complained, his brow furrowed as he blinked angrily up at Redclaw.

"Because leaving Frostkit out is mean." Redclaw's voice was stern, and her eyes sharp as she glared down at her son.

Frostkit sat silently at Redclaw's side, staring down at the ground with an empty gaze.

"But, look at her just sitting there!" Pinekit meowed with a sniff, wrinkling up her black nose. "She's no fun!"

Frostkit continued to sit in silence, scuffling her paws on the mossy nursery fur. She was unable to make herself look at the other kits.

"Yeah! And, she's a rogue!" Poolkit chimed in. "Beepaw told me; he

was on the patrol that found her."

"Rogues aren't supposed to be in ShadowClan," Pinekit added haughtily.

"So, we don't want to play with her," Autumnkit finished, giving his dark ginger and white pelt a self-satisfied shake.

"Too bad you have no choice in the matter," Redclaw growled. "Frostkit isn't going anywhere, so you three better learn to play nice."

Poolkit, Autumnkit, and Pinekit muttered unhappily to each other with twitching tails as Redclaw bent her head to nudge Frostkit forward with her muzzle.

"Go on, Frostkit," Redclaw said.

Head down, Frostkit obediently walked over to the other kits, her stomach twisting with stress.

"Ugh, fine," Pinekit meowed. "But, she's not on my team!"

"I'm with Pinekit!" Poolkit meowed quickly, bounding over to his sister.

"Hey!" Autumnkit protested as Pinekit and Poolkit dashed out of the nursery.

He sighed, looking over at Frostkit. Frostkit met his amber gaze for only a moment before she turned her large, blue eyes back towards the ground.

"Alright, come on," Autumnkit muttered, walking out of the den slowly as Frostkit silently followed.

Frostkit blinked as her eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight outside of the den. The air was cold, but the sun was shining brightly. A chilly leaf-bare breeze blew through camp, but Frostkit barely felt it. She had gotten bigger since May's death, stronger too, and her coat had gotten thicker and longer. Her pelt was a creamy-white everywhere but her face, tail, and paws. They were a light grey, just

like her mother. But, she hadn't seen those markings on any other cat in camp. Although, maybe there were other cats she hadn't seen... she was still getting used to number of cats in the ShadowClan. There was almost an overwhelming amount.

"Okay, we get to be ShadowClan warriors," Pinekit meowed, gesturing with her tail to herself and Poolkit. "You two are ThunderClan!"

"Why do we have to be ThunderClan!" Autumnkit protested, his expression sulky.

"Because you two are smelly mice-munchers," Pinekit meowed with a smug whisker twitch.

"Am not!" Autumnkit gasped, springing at Pinekit.

He bowled his sister over, and they went tumbling head over tail.

"Get Frostkit!" Pinekit meowed to Poolkit. "Smelly ThunderClan warriors are attacking!"

Poolkit sprung at Frostkit, but she neatly ducked under his leap. Poolkit turned and swiped at her, and again Frostkit leapt out of his way. Poolkit pounced with an irritated snarl, his growing frustration obvious, but Frostkit just dodged once more. Poolkit was big and clumsy, while Frostkit was small and quick.

"Aren't you going to fight me, mouse-heart!" Poolkit meowed, his black-and-white tail twitching. "ShadowClan never runs from a fight!"

Frostkit was silent, hanging back a safe few tail-lengths away from him. Poolkit frowned at her.

"You're no fun!" Poolkit said, before turning to spring at Autumnkit instead.

He and Pinekit quickly ganged up on Autumnkit, and soon they had their brother pinned, squeaking and withering under them.

"Let me up!" Autumnkit cried.

Frost glanced over at him, a twinge of worry appearing in her chest at the distress in his voice.

"Can't you fight us, Autumnkit?" Pinekit taunted, her black tail waving victoriously in the air. "Or, are you as weak as a WindClan cat?"

"I'm not WindClan! And, I'm not weak!" Autumnkit hissed, futilely struggling under his siblings' paws.

"Oh, yeah? Then why are you so—" Pinekit began. *"Oomph!"*

Pinekit's mew was cut short when Frostkit leapt at her, barreling her over and sending the two of them tumbling through the dirt. Autumnkit buckled with more vigor from under Poolkit, managing to shake him off.

"Get off me, rogue!" Pinekit spat furiously, grappling with Frostkit on the ground.

Anger stirred in Frostkit's belly. She narrowed her eyes at Pinekit, flipping over on top of her.

"Watch out Frostkit!" Autumnkit meowed.

Frostkit turned and saw Poolkit leaping at her. Frostkit ducked under Poolkit, and sprung off of Pinekit. Poolkit and Pinekit whirled to face her, side by side. They stalked up to Frostkit with snarls. Frostkit crouched close to the ground, quickly backpedaling away from them.

Then Frostkit felt a rush of air over her as Autumnkit sprung over her head, landing in front of her and rearing back on his hindpaws. He sent his siblings flying with two powerful swats of his paws before falling back onto all four of his feet.

"Ow! You hit me really hard, Autumnkit!" Poolkit meowed accusingly, reaching a paw up to his sore jaw.

"I've had enough of this *dumb game!"* Autumnkit snapped. "You two aren't playing fair!"

Pinekit scowled at him, her tail twitching.

"What's the matter with you? Normally you're fun," she said, glaring at Autumnkit.

"I'm going back to the nursery," Autumnkit grumbled, turning around with a swish of his dark ginger tail.

Frostkit quickly followed Autumnkit away, keeping her eyes locked on Autumnkit's tail so she didn't have to look at Poolkit or Pinekit.

"Leave me alone," Autumnkit meowed to Frostkit as they entered the bramble tunnel that led to the nursery. "It's your fault that they're being so mean."

Frostkit hesitated, her paws faltering. Her stomach tightened, as if she'd eaten a rock, and she stared down at the ground, studying her paws.

Autumnkit cast a glance back at her over his shoulder. He sighed.

"I guess you can't help it that you don't have any friends," he muttered.

Frostkit lifted her eyes when he said that. She met his gaze, and for the first time, held it. Autumnkit and Frostkit just stared at each other in silence for a few heartbeats.

"Do you ever say anything at all?" Autumnkit meowed, his brow furrowing.

Frostkit blinked, her ears flattening slightly.

"...Yes," Frostkit said softly in reply.

"Oh," Autumnkit said with a blink of surprise.

He turned back towards the nursery.

"Well, come on then," he meowed, disappearing into the bramble thicket.

Frostkit padded forward and followed him into the nursery.

Redclaw hesitated at the edge of the big Oak Tree's roots, near the entrance of the leader's den.

"Come in, Redclaw," Sedgestar meowed from inside the den, scenting her presence.

Redclaw twined her way through the twisting root tunnel, coming out into the warm, but dimly lit den, cozily lined with moss. Sedgestar sat in the center of the den with his brown-striped tail wrapped neatly around his paws. Sedgestar's mate Emberflower sat to his left, and the deputy Grovepelt sat to his right.

"You asked to see me?" Redclaw asked, eyeing the cats before her.

"Yes," Sedgestar meowed, inclining his head to her. "Have a seat, Redclaw."

Redclaw obeyed, settling onto the soft moss.

"As you know, tonight is the night of the gathering," Sedgestar said. "And, so I must decide what to tell the other Clans about our newest member, Frostkit."

"Yes, of course..." Redclaw meowed slowly, not sure where the leader was going with this.

"Frostkit has been under your care for some paw-fuls of sunrises now. So, tell me, what has she said of her father?" Sedgestar asked.

"Nothing," Redclaw meowed, her brow furrowed at the unusual question. "I mean, I think she understands that she has a father. But, it doesn't seem like she's met him. She's not even told me his name."

Sedgestar nodded.

"I see..." he meowed, his gaze thoughtful.

Redclaw's brow furrowed.

"Why are you asking me about this? I assumed he is just some

rogue, like her mother... is he not?" Redclaw asked.

Sedgestar was silent for a moment. Redclaw gazed at him, studying his face, but Sedgestar's expression was always hard to read.

"Frostkit's father is not a rogue. May had told me that he is a SkyClan warrior," Sedgestar said finally.

"What?" Redclaw said as her eyes stretched wide with surprise. "Who?"

"I don't know," Sedgestar said, shaking his head. "I thought Frostkit may, but it seems like she does not. The identity of her father appears to have died with May."

Sedgestar shot a sharp glance at Redclaw from the corner of his eyes.

"How does Frostkit get along with the other kits? Have they accepted her? Does she like them?" he asked.

Redclaw blinked, her mind jumping ahead as she inferred Sedgestar's train of thought.

"Wait. Wait a moment," Redclaw meowed, ignoring his questions as her tone turned accusative. "Are you thinking of *getting rid* of her? Giving Frostkit to SkyClan!?"

Sedgestar sighed, his expression drawn.

"May told me that she met with her mate and tried to seek shelter with SkyClan, but that he drove her away," Sedgestar explained. "However, the warrior code forbids the negligence of kits in need. If I were to bring up Frostkit during the gathering, in front of all of the Clans and their leaders, Fennelstar would have no choice but to take Frostkit in, or face backlash from all of the Clans."

Redclaw sprung to her paws, her tail lashing.

"Why do you want to get rid of her?" she demanded, the red and black fur on her back rising defensively. "And, send her to a father that doesn't want her? She's already been through so much, and you

want to uproot her entire life again?! She's just a kit! She's done nothing wrong!"

"I have nothing against Frostkit. I am not heartless, Redclaw," Sedgestar said, shooting her a look out of narrowed amber eyes. "I am just trying to do what is best for my Clan. We are in the middle of a difficult leaf-bare. And, the nursery is full of ShadowClan-born kits. We have no space or fresh-kill to spare."

"How do you know that the father will step forward? SkyClan could just say that you're lying," Redclaw pointed out, but she forced her voice to be quieter, not shouting this time. "And, if it is fresh-kill you are worried about, then Frostkit can have my share."

"And, mine," Emberflower said, shooting her mate a pointed look.

Redclaw blinked at Emberflower gratefully. Sedgestar glanced over at her as well, and his gaze softened.

"Is this truly what you want?" Sedgestar asked, looking back at Redclaw. "You already have your paws full with three other kits to raise."

"Frostkit hasn't even been here for a moon," Redclaw meowed, raising her chin to meet her leader's gaze levelly. "But, I already love her as I do Autumnkit, Pinekit, and Poolkit. Besides, I won't be raising her alone. Amberberry and Larkfoot have been more than willing to help care for her. Surely the three of us will be able to manage one more little kit."

Sedgestar was silent for a moment as he deliberated.

"Very well. She can stay," Sedgestar meowed, giving a decisive nod.

Redclaw's tail curled up in delight.

"On one condition..." Sedgestar added. "Frostkit cannot know that her father is from SkyClan."

"Okay," Redclaw said slowly, some of her excitement fading at Sedgestar's serious tone. "But, why?"

"You, Weaseltail, and the other queens will raise her as a member of our Clan," Sedgestar said. "I will not raise a kit that becomes a warrior whose loyalty might come into question. In the heat of battle, I will not have her hesitate because of the remains of some bond of kinship. As far as Frostkit will know, she has no family besides ShadowClan."

Sedgestar paused for emphasis, gazing at Redclaw hard.

"Do you understand?" Sedgestar asked.

Redclaw nodded.

"Good. As you said, her father does not want her anyway. It will do Frostkit no harm to grow up without knowing his existence," Sedgestar replied with a dismissive tail-flick. "To prevent Frostkit from finding out about her parentage, the less cats who know it the better. So, you are to tell no other cat that you know her father is a SkyClan warrior. Not the other queens. Even Weaseltail. The only other cats who know are Grovepelt and Emberflower."

Sedgestar nodded towards the cats at his side.

"And, Beepaw and Swoopstrike, the cats that were on the patrol that found May and Frostkit."

Sedgestar turned to Emberflower.

"Can we trust that Beepaw stays quiet?" Sedgestar asked, his gaze softening again as he looked at his mate. "Apprentices are notoriously chatty."

"Beepaw is nearing the end of his training," Emberflower replied. "He is a serious and loyal cat. He will do as you say."

Sedgestar nodded.

"Good," he meowed. "And, I will speak with Swoopstrike. He's hot-headed, but smart and fiercely loyal. As much as he doesn't like the fact that Frostkit's father is a SkyClan warrior, I'm sure he will see the wisdom behind my words and keep his mouth shut."

Sedgestar turned his attention back to Redclaw.

"I will tell the other Clans that ShadowClan has taken in an orphaned rogue she-kit and is raising her as our own. And, mention nothing of SkyClan," Sedgestar meowed. "You are dismissed."

Leaf-bare's Long Claws

Frostkit sat in the shade of the thorn bush that covered the nursery. The camp in front of her was covered in a glistening, white blanket of snow that glowed harshly in the morning light of dawn. Even though Frostkit was out of the snow and warm in the shelter of the nursery and her thick pelt, she still shivered. She remembered her trek through the forest, stumbling behind her mother, the aching of her cold paws, and the wind's horrid, icy bite. That thought brought back more memories, images of her brothers and the small, cold, cramped den where they spent the entirety of their short lives. But, those pictures were already fading from Frostkit's mind. She could barely recall Rain's grey pelt and Snow's bright white one. That memory of that walk, though, would be seared into her mind forever.

Frostkit looked over her shoulder and back into the nursery. She saw the sleeping forms of Autumnkit, Pinekit, and Poolkit curled up near the side of their mother, Redclaw, while Amberberry wrapped around the smaller forms of Mosskit and Murmurkit. Amberberry's and Redclaw's flanks brushed as they breathed, nestled together in the same large nest. Frostkit studied the shapes of the cats.

My new family..?

They weren't much of a family to her, though. Redclaw was caring enough and didn't treat Frostkit any differently than the other kits, but her kits often didn't bother to engage with Frostkit at all. Pinekit was the ringleader, and Poolkit followed her. Autumnkit was the only tolerable one. He would talk to her without wrinkling his nose up or calling her a rogue at least.

Besides Redclaw though, there were Larkfoot and Amberberry, who were kind to Frostkit too. But, Larkfoot was gone from the nursery now that her kits became apprentices, and Amberberry had her paws full with her two daughters— for just two moon-old kits, it was impressive how much trouble they got into. Well, Mosskit was always the one causing mischief, but Murmurkit followed her

everywhere.

Frostkit sighed, turning away from the sleeping cats and looking back out into camp.

She wished her mother was here. She wanted the family she had known, even if it was only for a brief moment of her life. Frostkit shivered again, feeling terribly alone. She stared out into the clearing in front of her.

ShadowClan.

She had been here for almost two moons now, but still the Clan felt foreign to her. The warriors weren't cruel necessarily, but they did stare and whisper sometimes. Frostkit thought it might have to do with the strange coloring of her pelt. May looked like her, but no forest cat seemed to. Every time they saw Frostkit and her white fur and her grey face, they were reminded that she was a stranger.

The tom called Swoopstrike was one of the harshest on Frostkit. He would snap at her for being underfoot when she would bat around a piece of moss in front of the nursery. Sometimes he muttered about wasting food on rogues when she took a piece of fresh-kill from the pile. And, Frostkit could see him eyeing her sometimes from across the clearing, like he was just waiting for her to do something wrong.

Frostkit heaved in a deep breath. She didn't know why all these cats; Swoopstrike, Pinekit, Poolkit, and others seemed to hate her for just existing.

It's not like I really want to be here anyway... But, I have nowhere else to go! ShadowClan is the only place for me.

Frostkit glanced back at Redclaw's and Amberberry's sleeping forms again.

It wasn't all terrible here at least. Frostkit liked Redclaw and her firm, but caring demeanor, and she liked sweet and gentle Amberberry as well. They were not May, but they were still good cats.

Weaseltail was growing on her too. He paid attention to her along with his three kits when he came to visit the nursery, and the other day he showed her the hunter's crouch. And, Autumnkit too, she supposed was okay... Maybe she'd become closer to Mosskit and Murmurkit too, although up until this point, Frostkit had been much too shy to try to play with them.

Frostkit's ears pricked as she heard a large patrol entering the camp. It was the cats that went to the Gathering last night, returning home with the rising sun. The cats were talking to each other in hushed, but tension-filled voices, and they gathered in the center of camp to converse. Curiosity prickling through her, Frostkit listened into their conversation.

"Can you believe ThunderClan?" a black tom meowed in an incredulous voice.

Darkpelt, Frostkit thought, remembering his name. She had seen him in the nursery sometimes, before his kits became ShadowClan's newest apprentices, Damppaw and Dewpaw.

"They are just asking to get their pelts ripped off," Swoopstrike growled in agreement to Darkpelt. "What frog-brains. Did you see Fennelstar's eyes *gleam* when Morningstar admitted how weak ThunderClan is? And Rabbitstar looked so smug. SkyClan and WindClan are going to take all their territory for themselves before they can say '*mouse.*'"

"SkyClan and WindClan should leave them alone," Clearstream meowed, her blue eyes wide with worry. "In cold, harsh times like these StarClan doesn't want us to fight. We should be focusing our energy on hunting."

"I've known Robinsong for seasons while she's been deputy," Grovepelt meowed. "She is a reasonable cat, and she will stop Fennelstar from doing anything too rash."

"Rabbitstar on the other paw..." Flymask growled, his grizzled, white muzzle crumpling up in disdain. "Is a uppity young tom that thinks he's StarClan's gift to WindClan. If Morningstar really believed he could get WindClan to stop stealing prey by *asking*

nicely he's got another thing coming."

"Did you see how frail Robinsong looked?" Elmclaw added, his deep voice rumbling. "She's clearly very sick. I'm surprised she even went to the Gathering, and I doubt she has much influence over Fennelstar in the condition she's in."

"Why didn't she stay back in camp?" Leafpaw pipped up in a curious voice.

Frostkit had been thinking the same thing.

"Leaders always take their deputies to Gatherings. I'm sure Fennelstar didn't want to appear weak by leaving her at home," her mentor, Snakeeyes answered, blinking her two-colored eyes down at her apprentice.

"No one wants to appear weak in the middle of leaf-bare," Emberflower agreed.

"Which, again, is why Morningstar is so frog-brained," Swoopstrike said.

"What happens if SkyClan and WindClan take all of ThunderClan's territory and prey, and they get really strong?" Beeclaw asked, a hint of trepidation in his voice.

Frostkit thought he looked small standing next to massive Darkpelt. Beeclaw, along with his brothers Hootflight and Thornheart, were ShadowClan's newest warriors.

"Yeah, what are we going to do, Sedgestar?" Dustleap, a ginger tom, meowed, turning to the leader, who had thus far just been standing in camp in a thoughtful silence.

"Let me call the rest of the Clan," Sedgestar meowed in an even voice, betraying none of his thoughts.

Sedgestar turned and bounded up the big, leaning boulder at the edge of the camp, dislodging puffs of powdery snow in the process.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath

Clanrock for a Clan meeting!" Sedgestar yowled, his voice ringing out loud and clear through the camp.

Frostkit turned to look behind her into the nursery, where the queens and kits were stirring. Redclaw raised her head from her nest, blinking her eyes sleepily.

"Was that Sedgestar?" Redclaw asked, turning towards Amberberry.

"I think so," Amberberry replied with a yawn. "Something must have happened at the Gathering."

"Do we get to go see?!" Mosskit meowed, stumbling over Murmurkit in her eagerness to get to her paws.

Her sister let out a soft mew of protest.

"Ow careful!" Murmurkit snarled, swiping a paw at Mosskit.

"You can watch from the nursery entrance if you're quiet," Amberberry scolded them, getting to her paws and brushing out of the thorny entrance of the den.

She greeted Frostkit with a purr as she walked past her, settling in the snow a few tail-lengths outside. Redclaw rose to her feet, and her green gaze flickered over her three sleepily-stirring kits before drifting up to meet Frostkit's.

"Frostkit, how long have you been out there? You're going to catch a chill," Redclaw said, furrowing her brow at her.

Frostkit turned and obediently padded into the nursery and over to Redclaw, her head bowed. Redclaw bent her head and gave Frostkit a brisk, affectionate lick across her forehead. Frostkit rumbled a quick purr in response.

"You four can also watch the meeting from the den entrance," Redclaw meowed as Pinekit, Poolkit, and Autumnkit stumbled to their paws. "But, I better not hear one sound out of you, or it's straight back into the den!"

Redclaw turned and left the den, Poolkit and Pinekit hot on her

paws. Pinekit gave Frostkit a disdained sniff as she walked past her. Frostkit gave an annoyed tail twitch at the rude greeting.

"What's happening?" Autumnkit asked Frostkit in a quiet voice as he padded to her side.

Together, they walked towards the entrance of the den and sat down a bit behind Mosskit, Murmurkit, Poolkit and Pinekit.

"ThunderClan's leader Morningstar told everyone that they are really weak during the Gathering," Frostkit said quietly. "Some warriors think that means WindClan and SkyClan may attack ThunderClan."

"What's that got to do with us?" Poolkit chimed in, wrinkling his nose and twisting to look at Frostkit from over his shoulder.

"Shh!" Pinekit hissed. "The meeting's starting!"

Frostkit leaned forward to peer out through the nursery entrance. She could just barely see Sedgestar perched on top of the big, snowy boulder through the intertwined tendrils of thorns.

"I have news from the Gathering," Sedgestar said commandingly, his head and tail held high. "ThunderClan is starving in their own territory. They asked for the other Clans to give them permission to hunt in the other territories."

Meows of protest rose from the gathered cats. Pinekit wrinkled up her nose.

"Letting ThunderClan hunt on our territory!" she hissed in a hushed voice. "No way!"

Redclaw shot a pointed look with narrowed eyes at Pinekit from over her shoulder, and Pinekit snapped her jaws shut.

"Don't worry; I explained that no such thing would happen," Sedgestar continued, silencing the voices with a wave of his tail. "Still, I think we need to be wary of the ThunderClan border. If they get desperate enough, they may start trespassing. And, we need to stay on the look out for SkyClan and WindClan cats coming from

their territory too. Both Rabbitstar and Fennelstar seemed eager to exploit ThunderClan's weakness."

"If ThunderClan is too weak to defend their territory, why don't we also make some of their land our hunting grounds? If WindClan and SkyClan take all of their land, then they could become a threat to us, unless we are strong enough to fight back," Fogfur piped up, bushing up his grey fur.

The fur down Sedgestar's spine bristled slightly.

"ShadowClan is strong enough to stand alone. We don't need more territory to face SkyClan or WindClan," Sedgestar meowed in a firm voice. "We have enough fresh-kill in our woods, and so far, no illness has broken out in camp, although this leaf-bare has been long and harsh."

Fogfur bowed his head, relenting, although Frostkit saw some cats glance side to side, looking at each other, and she felt like not everyone agreed with Sedgestar's decision. Sedgestar's eyes flickered over the crowd, not missing the dissent among his cats.

Sedgestar nodded down at Clearstream.

"Clearstream, if you feel the time is right," Sedgestar said, his voice taking on a tone of fond respect that he reserved only for Clearstream, his medicine cat, and Emberflower, his mate. "You can share the words StarClan gave to you."

Clearstream rose to her dainty paws, her long, fluffy grey fur billowing around her like a cloud.

"A half moon ago, when I traveled to Moonstone, I was given a vision," Clearstream meowed.

Frostkit's ears pricked with interest as she listened. Redclaw had told her about StarClan, and Moonstone and how it was the medicine cats' job to communicate with StarClan. She still felt the whole thing was sort of bizarre though. May had never told her anything about StarClan. And, her family wasn't from the Clans, so why should Frostkit care about StarClan? It's not like anyone she

knew would be there, watching over her. Frostkit's heart twinged.

May wouldn't be there. ...Would she?

"I was walking through a forest covered in snow. I seemed to be alone; I could not hear or scent any other cat," Clearstream spoke. "Suddenly, a large, white owl flew over my head. I was frightened for a moment, but then I heard these words: 'ShadowClan does not need to fear the snow. From the cold, great strength soars.' Then my pelt was warmed, and suddenly our clan-mates were clustered around me, and we were keeping each other warm with the heat of our fur."

Sedgestar nodded approvingly at her words.

"StarClan tells us that we are strong. We have no need to fear this leaf-bare or any Clan," he said in his deep voice.

Frostkit looked around at the other cats. She was surprised to see how relaxed everyone suddenly was. A few heartbeats ago, their fur was prickling and they looked on edge, shooting nervous glances around like they half expected SkyClan or WindClan warriors to burst through the thorn thicket that surrounded the camp at any moment. But, now cats were purring faintly, sharing reassuring nods with eyes that shone with certainty and pride.

"We will still remain vigilant on the ThunderClan border," Sedgestar added. "But, we will successfully face whatever threat may come. This meeting is dismissed."

Sedgestar bounded down from Clanrock, and the rest of the cats rose to their paws, breaking into groups to talk to each other, or heading out of camp on patrols. Frostkit watched them vanish into the shadows as they walked through the thorn tunnel and under the dark trees that loomed overhead, hunched and ladened with frost and snow. She shivered, wondering if they really could face anything they came across there.

Outsider

"I'm going to be the best apprentice ShadowClan has ever seen," Pinekit boasted, her black-furred tail twitching with excitement. "Look what I can do!"

Pinekit crouched down, slinking forward in a hunter's crouch, then leaped suddenly onto Poolkit's back.

"Hey!" Poolkit protested, shaking her off.

Pinekit gave a growl, leaping on him again and the two siblings went tumbling across camp.

Frostkit watched them play from a distance, her long fluffy grey tail wrapped neatly around her paws. They were all six moons old now, which meant that they were ready to become apprentices. Frostkit sighed quietly to herself. She didn't feel as excited about the prospect of it as the other kits did, though. Pinekit, Poolkit, and Autumnkit were dying to see the outside of the camp, the forests of ShadowClan's territory, and even the lands beyond. They chatted incessantly like birds about how they heard the oaks of Fourtrees towered so high, they touched the clouds, and how they hoped to be able to be brought along with Sedgestar or Clearstream on the long, perilous journey to Mothermouth, which contained the Moonstone.

Frostkit, however, did not care to venture beyond the thorny walls of the camp. She didn't want to see the territory, or Fourtrees or Mothermouth. Slowly, she had come to see the camp place as her home—a safe place. She had already seen the forest beyond. She had seen how unforgiving and cruel it was.

Frostkit looked down at her paws. Their grey markings were stained brown with mud, and they sunk slightly into the muddy ground beneath them. New-leaf had reached the forest finally, bringing with it a thaw that touched every tail-length of the camp, making

everything wet and damp, although the air was warm and sweet, and smelt of flowers.

"Quiz!" Poolkit meowed suddenly, springing off of Pinekit and to his paws. "Who is the new deputy of ThunderClan?"

Frostkit's ears pricked in interest; she knew the answer.

While ShadowClan made it through the leaf-bare without losing a single cat to hunger or sickness, the other Clans were not so fortunate. The word was that ThunderClan barely scraped by. Frostkit had heard from Weaseltail that they had finally rallied and fought back against WindClan and SkyClan, but not without some losses, both from battle and from weakness. Morningstar himself was rumored to have lost a life, and one of the cats who died was ThunderClan's deputy, Leafstorm.

"Um..." Pinekit meowed, blinking hard as she thought.

"It's Acornear," Autumnkit cut in, padding out of the nursery and over to them.

"Oh yeah! I remember now," Pinekit meowed, giving a snicker. *"Acornear!* Morningstar probably made him deputy because he felt so bad about giving him such a dumb name!"

Poolkit and Autumnkit purred loudly. Frostkit purred quietly along with them, watching their amusement from the distance.

"And, who's the new deputy of SkyClan?" Poolkit meowed, dancing from paw to paw.

Frostkit recalled the conversation she overheard a few moons ago between the warriors about SkyClan's deputy, Robinsong, and how weak she had seemed then. Robinsong had clung to life for a couple more moons, but last gathering, she was gone, and SkyClan had a new deputy.

Pinekit and Autumnkit were silent as they thought. As the moments stretched past, Pinekit rolled her eyes.

"This is so boring, Poolkit, let's go back to battle training," she

meowed.

"You're only saying it's boring because you don't know," Poolkit said, whiskers twitching smugly. "We're going to have to know all the deputies and leaders of the other Clans when we're apprentices! So, come on, Robinsong died of greencough, who's the new deputy?"

"It's Paledusk," Frostkit said quietly.

Her blue eyes widened. She hadn't meant to speak and draw attention to herself; the words had just slipped out.

Pinekit, Poolkit and Autumnkit turned to look at her, and Autumnkit nodded.

"That's right, I remember now, Dad told Mom that," Autumnkit said.

"No one asked you, Dirtface," Pinekit huffed to Frostkit, her tail twitching irritably.

Frostkit growled softly at the cruel nickname. As she grew, the grey fur on her face had too, making a mask that covered her muzzle, eyes and ears. She had caught sight of it on occasion when she saw her reflection in the puddles around camp. Sometimes it made her freeze in shock. For a moment, she thought that she had seen her mother.

Frostkit turned and padded away from them, her head down as she padded back to the nursery.

"Why are you always so mean to her?" Frostkit heard Autumnkit hiss to Pinekit in a hushed voice.

"What?" Pinekit replied, her voice indignant. "*We* were playing. She wasn't a part of the game!"

"You're just mad that she knew the answer, and you didn't," Autumnkit huffed.

Their squabbling voices faded as Frostkit padded further away. She was headed to her spot just outside the nursery, half-hidden under

the thick thorn thicket. She had almost reached it when a pair of silver-striped legs appeared in front of her, seemingly materializing out of thin air. Frostkit jerked her head up in surprise, and the grey dappled-tabby cat attached to the legs sprung out of her way.

"Watch where you're going, rogue!" Swoopstrike hissed, his silver tail lashing.

"... Sorry!" Frostkit managed to squeak, but the warrior had already stalked off with a huff, leaving Frostkit to wonder if he had even heard her.

Frostkit quickly took the last few trembling steps that brought her into the shelter of the nursery. Safely tucked under the thorn bush, she then bent her head to give her white chest a few comforting licks, trying to flatten her bristling fur.

"Don't let them bother you," a nearby voice said.

Frostkit jumped in surprise at the words, and she turned to see Snakeeyes emerge from the nursery's entrance and pad over to her. The white she-cat's paw-steps were slow; her belly was swollen with kits. She had moved to the nursery just a little while ago because she was so close to her kitting time. Frostkit studied Snakeeyes hesitantly as she approached.

The she-cat had never been cruel to her, but she never showed much interest in her either. As far as Frostkit could tell, Snakeeyes mostly kept to herself, which made Frostkit confused as to why she was bothering to talk to her now.

"When I was your age, the other cats would make fun of me too," Snakeeyes continued, sitting down next to Frostkit. "For the way my eyes look."

Snakeeyes blinked at Frostkit, emphasizing the startling difference between her brilliant blue eye and her deep green one.

"I'm different, like you are," she said.

Frostkit felt a few stirrings of warmth in her chest at the camaraderie of her words.

"*Never* forget that you're different," Snakeeyes emphasized, and Frostkit swallowed hard, her heart dropping at the sudden change in conversation.

She looked down at her grey paws.

"... Because *they* will never let you forget that you're different," Snakeeyes continued, nodding towards the cats out in the camp and towards Pinekit, Poolkit, and Autumnkit.

Frostkit's brow furrowed with confusion, and her gaze was slowly drawn back up to Snakeeyes'.

"They will always see you as an outsider. They will be reminded that you are one just from the way you look," Snakeeyes meowed. "You will have to fight twice as hard, hunt twice as much, run twice as far as them to prove yourself."

Frostkit blinked hard, the ground swaying slightly under her at that thought.

That's too much.

"But, you can do it," Snakeeyes said, her voice firm. "Make your difference your strength. Shroud yourself in it. Use it to drive you. If you do that, then they can never use it to hurt you again."

The warrior looked kindly down at the kit.

"I asked Sedgestar to give me my warrior name 'Snakeeyes.' So, everyone will be reminded of how I look just by saying my name," she said. "When I was young, I thought the way I looked was a defect. But, I'm not ashamed of it anymore. So, no one can hurt me with it."

Snakeeyes looked away from Frostkit to stare out into camp, her mismatched gaze falling on Rowanheart.

"My eyes are no longer a curse for me. Rowanheart thinks my eyes are beautiful," Snakeeyes said softly, her eyes filling with love as she curled her tail around her belly.

She glanced back over at Frostkit.

"And, your pelt is beautiful too," she said.

"Thank...Thank you," Frostkit managed to stutter, blinking hard as she gazed up at Snakeeyes. "That's very wise..."

Snakeeyes let out a soft purr, then she cleared her throat.

"So, just don't let them get you down, kit," she said, a bit more gruffly, bending her head to nose Frostkit off.

Frostkit walked away from her, heading back into camp.

As she padded away, Frostkit felt herself wishing that Snakeeyes could be her mentor, but she knew that she would be in the nursery with her kits during all of her training. Frostkit sighed heavily to herself, her paws slowing as she approached the center of camp. It was mid-morning and ShadowClan was buzzing with activity. The fresh-kill pile was high, packed with frogs and lizards lured out by the warm weather. Frostkit wrinkled her nose slightly when she gazed at them. Although she didn't mind the taste once she got through the scaly skin, she preferred her prey to be furred. Frostkit's gaze flickered up from the fresh-kill pile to scan over the warriors that were in camp. Her eyes darted over the pelts that were now so familiar to her, after spending all these moons in camp.

"Are you wondering who's going to be your mentor?"

Frostkit jumped, startled at the voice from behind her.

She turned to see Autumnkit padding over, and she let out a sigh.

"You scared me, Autumnkit," she said.

His whiskers twitched in amusement.

"Then try being less jumpy next time," he teased, taking a seat next to Frostkit, seemingly not worried about the muddy ground that splashed all up his dark ginger haunches when he did so.

Autumnkit nodded towards the warriors out in camp.

"I hope I get Darkpelt," Autumnkit said wistfully. "Did you know he once chased off a trespassing WindClan patrol single-pawed? Or, it would be so cool if Thornheart was my mentor. He's like crazy strong and a great fighter. Oh! Or, what about Sedgestar! Do you think he'll want to take on an apprentice?"

"You really want to be the leader's apprentice?" Frostkit asked quietly, her ears pricking in surprise.

Autumnkit stared over at her with wide eyes.

"Well, of course!" he gasped. "Sedgestar is the bravest, strongest cat in all of the forest! Why wouldn't I want him to be my mentor?"

Frostkit shrugged.

"It just seems like a lot of pressure to me," she said. "Having to always impress the leader. I wouldn't want Sedgestar to be my mentor."

Autumnkit snorted.

"You're weird Frostkit," Autumnkit said, but there was no venom in his voice, like there would've been in Pinekit's if she had said that. "Then who do you want to be your mentor?"

Frostkit was silent for a moment as she thought, gazing out at the warriors in camp.

"Rowanheart," Frostkit said finally, recalling her conversation with Snakeeyes.

If Rowanheart can accept Snakeeyes, then he might be able to accept me too.

"Why Rowanheart?" Autumnkit asked, his brow furrowed.

Frostkit hesitated, not sure if she wanted to confess the reason why and explain her whole personal conversation with Snakeeyes to Autumnkit.

"...Ugh it's not because you think he's handsome, is it?" Autumnkit

asked, sticking his tongue out in disgust. "I've heard she-cats mooning over him. Leafbreeze especially seems to think he's StarClan's gift to ShadowClan!"

Frostkit's fur fluffed out defensively.

"What? No! That's not why!" Frostkit exclaimed. "Don't be ridiculous. And, who cares if other cats think he's handsome; he's Snakeeyes' mate. They're having kits together!"

Autumnkit didn't look entirely convinced by Frostkit's defense, but before he could say anything else, Frostkit spotted Sedgestar emerge from his den in the tangled roots of the old Oak Tree and bound up the boulder that leaned out over the camp clearing. Sedgestar took a moment to shake the mud from his paws from his perch before raising his chin.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath Clanrock for a clan meeting!"

"This must be it!" Autumnkit purred excitedly to Frostkit, his eyes sparkling.

Frostkit didn't echo his excitement. Instead, she felt her stomach flip in unease, but she followed Autumnkit as he bounded into the center of the camp. Warriors padded over from around camp, some appearing out of dens; evidently they had been sleeping in this morning. Autumnkit took a seat very close to Clanrock, and Frostkit settled down next to him. The warriors brushed past Frostkit and Autumnkit, coming to gather at the sound of their leader's cry. Frostkit eyed them from the corner of her gaze.

Which one of them will be my mentor?

Frostkit's gaze caught Rowanheart's. He was seated next to his mother, Emberflower, and their two nearly identical ginger pelts intermingled. Rowanheart gave Frostkit a friendly nod, and she felt her paws twitch with not quite excitement, but it wasn't anxiety either as she quickly glanced away from him.

Maybe Rowanheart will be my mentor after all.

"It's happening!" Poolkit gasped, barreling over to take a seat at Autumnkit's other side.

His amber eyes gleamed wildly in his black and white furred face, and he seemed hardly able to sit still.

"I wonder if Sedgestar will make Frostkit an apprentice with us, or will he decide to not bother training a rogue?" Pinekit meowed haughtily, padding over and taking a seat next to Poolkit.

Frostkit felt a sting at her words, but it was only slight—she had expected some sort of comment from Pinekit.

"Watch your tongue young she-cat!" Redclaw snapped from behind, making all four of the kits start in fear. "Or, I will tell Sedgestar *you* are unfit to be an apprentice yet."

Frostkit turned to watch the queen approach them. Pinekit ducked her head down at Redclaw's reproach.

"Moooom," Pinekit whined. "You can't do that! I'm six moons old, that means I get to be an apprentice!"

"Frostkit is a ShadowClan cat," Redclaw said, glowering down at her daughter. "And, I raised her as much as I raised you, so I won't have you turning against each other!"

"But, Damppaw says..." Pinekit weakly protested.

"Oh, Damppaw!" Redclaw meowed. "Is he the one filling your head with this nonsense?! He must be getting it from his mentor Marshnose, but if I have a word with Larkfoot, I'm sure she would be happy to straighten Damppaw out! Do you really think that after Larkfoot helped rear Frostkit, she'd be happy to hear her son spreading such snake-dung?"

"Mom!" Pinekit huffed.

But, before she could say anything else, Sedgestar began to speak and quiet fell across the whole camp.

"New-leaf is here!" Sedgestar yowled, his voice ringing triumphantly

through the camp. "As Clearstream's vision showed us, ShadowClan not only survived the long, cold leaf-bare, but we've grown stronger because of it!"

Frostkit's ears pricked as the cats around her began to yowl with excitement, their eyes bright, claws flexing eagerly into the muddy ground. Sedgestar paused, the look on his face pleased as he allowed his clan-mates to shout their victory into the sky. After a few heartbeats of indulgence, Sedgestar raised his tail, and quiet settled over the camp again.

"ShadowClan is the strongest clan in the forest!" Sedgestar declared. "No other can compete with us in our strength or size. And, we continue to grow. Today, I am proud to announce the making of four new apprentices!"

There was more cheering at this, but Frostkit's pelt prickled as she realized she was getting some sideways looks. As expected, not everyone was thrilled with her becoming an apprentice. Frostkit took note of the cats that looked the most displeased with the notion.

Marshnose, Damppaw, Swoopstrike, Flymask...

Frostkit decided that she would do her best to avoid the four of them during her apprenticeship.

"Poolkit, Pinekit, Autumnkit, and Frostkit, would you please step forward?" Sedgestar meowed.

"Be good," Redclaw hissed from behind them, and although she shot Pinekit a stern look, the red and black she-cat looked proud as the kits stood and strode over to stand in the shadow of Clanrock.

Sedgestar cleared his throat.

"You four have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior names, you will be known as Poolpaw, Pinepaw, Autumnpaw, and Frostpaw," Sedgestar said.

Frostpaw took a deep breath.

Here we go...

"Poolpaw, your mentor will be Fogfur. I hope Fogfur will pass down all he knows on to you."

Frostpaw's brow furrowed as she tried to recall what she knew about this warrior. Besides that he seemed stern and serious, Frostpaw couldn't think much more about what he was like. She turned her head to watch Fogfur pad over to them. His long grey fur stirred in the breeze like a rippling cloud, and his green eyes looked steady and pleased as he stood in front of his new apprentice.

"Fogfur, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Treefur, and you have shown yourself to be driven and fiercely brave. You will be the mentor of Poolpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

Frostpaw watched Fogfur dip his head so he and Poolpaw could touch noses, then they stepped aside.

"Pinepaw," Sedgestar said, continuing the ceremony without delay. "Your mentor will be Grovepelt. I hope Grovepelt will pass down all he knows on to you."

Frostpaw's eyes widened in surprise as Sedgestar named his deputy to mentor Pinepaw. Grovepelt rose to his paws from the base of Clanrock and padded over to Pinepaw.

"Grovepelt, you are ready to take on a new apprentice. You trained me excellently as my mentor, and you have served your clan faithfully for many moons now as deputy. You will be the mentor of Pinepaw, and I know you will pass on all you know to her," Sedgestar said.

Grovepelt touched his greying muzzle to Pinepaw's and the two stepped aside.

"I didn't know Grovepelt was Sedgestar's mentor!" Autumnpaw whispered to Frostpaw, shooting his sister and her new mentor a jealous look.

"Autumnpaw," Sedgestar said, pulling Autumnpaw's and Frostpaw's attention back to him. "Your mentor will be Beeclaw. I hope Beeclaw will pass down all he knows on to you."

Autumnpaw's face gave nothing away as the young black-furred warrior padded over to him.

Although I know he was wishing for Darkpelt or Thornheart instead... Frostpaw thought

"Beeclaw, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Emberflower, and you have shown yourself to be loyal and clever. You will be the mentor of Autumnpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

Beeclaw and Autumnpaw touched noses, and the two of them stepped aside. Frostpaw was relieved to see that Autumnpaw looked pleased with his mentor, even though she knew Beeclaw was not his first choice.

"Frostpaw."

A chill ran up Frostpaw's spine as Sedgestar called her new name. She slowly raised her eyes from Autumnpaw and up to ShadowClan's leader. Sedgestar looked down at her from the top of Clanrock, his face unreadable. Frostpaw searched his amber eyes for a hint of his thoughts.

Does he agree with some of the others and not want me apprenticed? But, he let me and May into ShadowClan... that means he must want me here, right?

"Your mentor will be Swoopstrike. I hope Swoopstrike will pass down all he knows on to you," Sedgestar said.

Frostpaw felt like her paws were frozen to the ground as the name he said echoed in her ears.

No... I couldn't have heard him right.

But, there the dappled silver tabby was, striding over to Frostpaw. Swoopstrike's narrowed green eyes met Frostpaw's, and he didn't

look pleased as he towered in front of her, waiting for Sedgestar to complete the ceremony.

"Swoopstrike, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Weaseltail, and you have shown yourself to be a skilled fighter and loyal warrior. You will be the mentor of Frostpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her," Sedgestar said.

Swoopstrike shoved his face towards Frostpaw's. She had to resist the urge to flinch back as he brusquely touched his muzzle to hers, before quickly recoiling so they had to touch for only the shortest amount of time as possible.

"Poolpaw! Pinepaw! Autumnpaw! Frostpaw!"

The clan was chanting their names, but Frostpaw hardly heard them. She was too busy staring at Sedgestar's brown striped back as he bounded down from Clanrock.

How could he do this?

Frostpaw blinked hard. He had to have known that Swoopstrike hated her. Yet, Sedgestar made him her mentor! How was she supposed to survive her training with Swoopstrike hissing at her every other moment?

Frostpaw struggled to take a deep breath, searching for a scrap of calm inside of her. She tried to recall Snakeeyes' words from earlier.

"Make your difference your strength. Shroud yourself in it. Use it to drive you. If you do that, then they can never use it to hurt you again."

Frostpaw shook her head to herself; Snakeeyes' words rung hollowly in her head.

But, how will I be able to prove myself with Swoopstrike as my mentor?

"Hey, are you okay?" Autumnpaw asked, snapping Frostpaw out of her thoughts.

He had padded over to her as the four of them lingered in the camp.

They just had a few moments before they would be swept off to their first apprentice duties. Frostpaw just sighed, giving a shrug. Autumnpaw peered at her with concern, but before he could say anymore, Mosskit and Murmurkit came running up to the group.

"I wish I was an apprentice now!" Mosskit exclaimed with a jealous sigh.

"One more moon isn't that much longer to wait," Poolpaw pointed out.

Mosskit's tail twitched mischievously.

"Do you think they'd make me an apprentice early if I left camp and caught some prey?" she asked, her gaze sparkling.

Murmurkit stared at her sister with wide eyes, stricken. However, before the soft-spoken Murmurkit could manage a response, another voice rang out.

"Mosskit! You will do no such thing!" Amberberry scolded, striding up to her daughters.

"Awww," Mosskit whined, turning to Amberberry and gazing at her with wide eyes. "You heard me?"

Amberberry's expression softened. Frostpaw knew that the sweet-natured queen could never stay angry long.

"Of course I heard you, dear," Amberberry said. "You always speak too loudly."

Murmurkit whispered something to Mosskit that was so quiet, Frostpaw could barely made out the words.

"Told you so," Murmurkit hissed.

Mosskit shot her sister a sour look.

Amberberry turned to the new apprentices.

"Congratulations!" she purred, giving them all affectionate blinks.

She was quickly joined by Larkfoot, who also came to congratulate the kits she helped bring up in the nursery, as well as Redclaw and Weaseltail, of course. Larkfoot gave each of the new apprentices motherly licks on their heads, and Redclaw gazed at the four of them with pride. However, even in the face of the queens' affection, Frostpaw's stomach churned. She couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that had appeared once Sedgestar had named her mentor.

"Congratulations all of you," Weaseltail's rumbled as Larkfoot helped Amberberry herd her kits away.

Noticing the bleak look on Frostpaw's face, he turned to her.

"Swoopstrike can be intense. He was even as my apprentice, but he's a good warrior, and he will be a good mentor," Weaseltail meowed.

"I don't understand why I got stuck with Grovepelt!" Pinepaw complained, but not loud enough to be overheard by anyone outside Frostpaw and her family. "He's practically as old as dirt!"

Weaseltail's brow furrowed.

"Don't be rude about your deputy!" he snapped to his daughter.

Pinepaw's chin jutted out, unrepentant.

"What concerns me is why Sedgestar gave Frostpaw Swoopstrike to be her mentor," Redclaw interjected, her green eyes narrowed. "He's been nothing but cruel to her."

"I'm sure Sedgestar has his reasons," Weaseltail meowed, carefully watching his hot-tempered mate out of the corner of his eye.

Redclaw's tail was twitching, and she had her jaw set in a mutinous way that Weaseltail was all too familiar with.

"Why don't we go out for a tour of the territory?" Beeclaw asked, padding over to Autumnpaw, utterly unaware of the tension in the air surrounding the group.

"...Okay," Autumnpaw meowed after a moment of hesitation.

"Can we go too?!" Poolpaw said excitedly, shooting a glance at Fogfur as he padded over.

Fogfur shrugged.

"Sure why not?" he meowed.

"We will also join you," Grovepelt meowed, going to stand next to Pinepaw.

The three mentors turned almost unconsciously it seemed to Frostpaw.

She shifted from foot to foot under their gaze, well aware that Swoopstrike seemed to have vanished, and she did not know what she would be doing. Frostpaw almost sighed in relief as he appeared, emerging from the tunnel at the base of the Oak Tree, which led down to Sedgestar's den.

"What's going on?" Swoopstrike said in a gruff voice as he noticed the mentors circled around Frostpaw.

"We were just about to take our apprentices on a tour of the territory," Grovepelt meowed. "Would you like to join us?"

Swoopstrike scowled slightly.

"I was thinking collecting moss would be a good first duty for an apprentice," he said.

Beeclaw wrinkled his nose and shot Frostpaw a sympathetic glance. Fogfur shrugged and turned towards the camp entrance, but the deputy was not so easily cowed.

"Come on, Swoopstrike," Grovepelt said. "Come with us. These kits haven't even set foot outside camp yet. It's good for apprentices to get a tour on their first day, or else you'll find that they'll end up terribly lost the first couple times they go hunting."

Swoopstrike grumbled something under his breath that Frostpaw couldn't catch.

"Fine," he sighed after a moment.

Grovepelt's whiskers twitched contentedly.

"Good," he meowed. "Let's get going then."

Grovepelt led the way to the thorn tunnel at the edge of the camp. Pinepaw followed him with Poolpaw at her side. Fogfur was behind them, and at his tail was Beeclaw and Autumnpaw, the two of them already engaged in conversation. Swoopstrike padded off to follow them, but Frostpaw hung back, her paws dragging on the ground.

Her heart filled with trepidation as she slowly drew closer to the looming thorn barrier, and the dark tunnel that pierced through it.

"Hurry up," Swoopstrike snapped impatiently at Frostpaw from the tunnel, noticing her tail-lengths behind him.

Frostpaw jumped at his words, her nervous blue gaze widening. After a heartbeat of hesitation, she rushed forward. At the entrance of the tunnel, she paused, the pounding of her blood so loud in her ears that it drowned out all other noise. She gazed into the darkness of the tunnel, feeling the blackness open a hole that yawned back at her in her chest. Shuddering, Frostpaw threw herself into the shadows.

"Sedgestar?" Redclaw called from the entrance to his den.

"Come in, Redclaw," Sedgestar said, his deep voice echoing up from the tunnel in the roots.

Redclaw padded inside the tunnel, her tail twitching. She entered into the dim earthen cave. Sedgestar sat up in his nest. Emberflower remained curled up by his side, but she blinked her green gaze up at Redclaw.

"What can I do for you, Redclaw?" Sedgestar asked.

Redclaw exhaled slowly.

"It's about Frostpaw and Swoopstrike," she said.

Sedgestar sighed.

"I thought you'd have something to say about that..." he said.

"I just don't understand," Redclaw cut in. "Swoopstrike hates her with every hair on his pelt! Any cat with two eyes can see it! Why would you assign him as her mentor?"

"Swoopstrike knows the truth of her parentage," Sedgestar said. "I need her to be watched by a warrior that is aware that she is half-SkyClan in case her father ever tries to reach out to her."

"But, then there are other plenty of cats that you could've chosen to train her!" Redclaw protested. "Emberflower, Grovepelt, Beeclaw, or me! Any of us would've been better than Swoopstrike."

"I had already decided Grovepelt and Beeclaw would mentor Pinepaw and Autumnpaw. And, I couldn't have given her to you," Sedgestar said, glancing at her sympathetically. "You raised her, and you know that queens don't normally train the kits they brought up."

"Oh, so now you're treating her like a regular ShadowClan kit," Redclaw huffed. "What other apprentices need to be 'watched' by their mentors?"

The sympathy in Sedgestar's gaze evaporated as he narrowed his amber eyes at her. Redclaw glanced away from her leader, her fur prickling under the strength of his powerful gaze.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, Sedgestar," Redclaw said. "It's just that she is such a quiet, sensitive kit. And, Swoopstrike—"

"That's exactly why I chose him and not any of the other cats you named," Sedgestar said, interrupting her.

"What?" Redclaw said, blinking in confusion.

"I know Swoopstrike is distrustful of her and that he can be difficult at the best of times. But, Frostpaw needs to be strong and tough and brave if she is to survive in this Clan," Sedgestar said.

"Regardless of who trains her, there will always be cats who hate her for being an outsider. If she cannot preserve and train successfully despite that fact, then she is not fit to be a ShadowClan warrior. It follows the same logic as the other pairings I made with your kits. I gave Pinepaw to Grovepelt to learn maturity and compassion from him. Autumnpaw to mild Beeclaw so he can learn that it's good, at times, to calm his fiery temper and playful attitude. And, Poolpaw to stern Fogfur so he can learn that sometimes it's good to be serious. These are things they all should learn before becoming warriors. Their mentors will ultimately strengthen them, not stifle them."

Redclaw frowned. She glanced over at Emberflower for support, but her ginger-furred sister just gave a small head shake, indicating that Sedgestar would not be swayed. Redclaw, though, was much too headstrong to back down without a fight. She curled her lip up at Sedgestar.

"No. You are making things needlessly difficult for Frostpaw specifically," Redclaw protested. "She's been in ShadowClan practically her whole life. Will you ever stop blaming her for being born outside of ShadowClan; something that was completely out of her control?"

"I'm not blaming her for not being born in ShadowClan," Sedgestar snapped, suddenly rising to his paws and causing Redclaw to take a step backwards. "The reason we have apprentices is to train young cats to be warriors. Warriors are the life-blood of the Clan. They must be loyal to ShadowClan above all other things. So, besides just learning hunting and fighting, apprentices must learn these traits, and, yes, learn *to be loyal*. Sure, for cats that are ShadowClan born, it's easier since they already have their family here— roots that spread back generation after generation in ShadowClan. But, that doesn't mean that it's impossible for a cat like Frostpaw to prove her loyalty, it will just be more difficult."

Redclaw's tail twitched, but she was silent.

"Once Frostpaw completes her training with Swoopstrike and learns loyalty and the warrior code, just like all of the other apprentices, she shall have my full trust as any ShadowClan warrior does,"

Sedgestar said.

He flicked his tail at Redclaw.

"You are dismissed," he said coolly.

Fight Twice As Hard

Frostpaw's heart hammered in her throat as she sprinted along after the rest of her patrol. Her legs burned as she moved them faster than she ever had before, struggling to keep up with the other cats. Swoopstrike was in the lead, and despite his earlier complaints about the patrol, he now seemed enthusiastic for them to travel through the territory at a break-neck speed. A forest of seemingly endless dark pine trees flashed around Frostpaw, but she didn't have the time to take in their thin, towering silhouettes— she was too focused on keeping her paws moving one after the other at the frantic pace.

Grovepelt was the one to finally slow, slacking his pace and clearing his throat to signal for the others to as well. Frostpaw almost stumbled in relief as she eagerly slowed her paws. Autumnpaw, Pinepaw, and Poolpaw seemed to echo her relief as they too fell back with her with quiet sighs. Swoopstrike, however, only dropped his pace reluctantly, shooting Grovepelt a look from narrowed eyes.

Grovepelt caught his gaze and narrowed his eyes in return at the younger warrior.

"We are giving a tour of the territory remember Swoopstrike? Not just running through it," Grovepelt meowed cooly.

Swoopstrike dipped his head stiffly to the deputy without saying anything, but Frostpaw noticed his jaw clenching.

After Frostpaw managed to catch her breath, she lifted her head to finally have a chance to gaze around at her surroundings. In every direction around her, thin, soaring pine trees stretched up towards the sky. Frostpaw tilted her head back as she traced their trunks up, watching their branches and narrow dark green leaves bristle up at the clouds. The ground beneath them was coated with the pines' discarded needles, which softened the sound of the cat's footfalls, making it seem like their patrol was gliding soundlessly through the forest.

Frostpaw's eyes were wide with surprise as she looked around. She couldn't believe how the forest had transformed during the few moons that she'd been at the ShadowClan camp. The forest she remembered was a world of white. Everything had been coated in snow, and the pines had been frozen in ice, like jagged milky white claws. Even the sky had been grey with snow clouds. Now the world was colored in shades of green and brown and black, and the shimmer of a bright blue sky peeked down in the gaps between the pine's branches.

"Come along," Grovepelt said to the four gaping apprentices, padding along.

Frostpaw jerked and did a little dash to catch up to the deputy. Even though there was little undergrowth to hide behind, Grovepelt's brown pelt still quickly vanished into the deep shadows cast by the pines.

Frostpaw's den-mates quickly caught up too, and Autumnpaw moved to pad along side her.

"Isn't this great!" he said to Frostpaw with a pleased purr.

Frostpaw nodded. She had to admit, she was enjoying the forest way more that she thought she would. The smell of the fresh air in her nose, the soft pine needles under her paws instead of the muddy ground of the camp, the warm sunshine on her back...

"What is that?" Pinepaw gasped, snapping Frostpaw out of her thoughts.

The patrol had reached a sudden gap in the forest. The pine tree line stopped abruptly, and in front of them was a small stretch of grass for several fox-lengths, then a strange strip of smooth, black stone. It stretched as far as the eye could see left and right, then there was another stretch of grass and suddenly trees sprung up again like there had been no interruption.

Poolpaw started to creep forward across the grass, his eyes locked on the curious black stone.

"Stay under the trees," Fogfur snapped at him.

Poolpaw jumped in surprise at his mentor's harsh tone and scrambled back to the trees and the rest of the patrol.

"This is the thunderpath," Grovepelt explained. "Monsters travel on it, so you always have to be careful not to get too close."

"It doesn't look that dangerous," Pinepaw sniffed.

But, she had to almost immediately eat her words as suddenly a roaring sound filled the air. The ground rumbled under Frostpaw's feet as something huge went hurdling down the thunderpath and past the patrol. There was a wave of foul smelling air, a flash of metallic color, and then it was gone, only a fading echo of a rumble remained to show that anything had past at all.

All of Frostpaw's fur had bushed out, and she looked over at the other apprentices. She was relieved to see that she was not the only one frightened of the monster; they all looked as unsettled as she did, with bristling fur and wide eyes. Frostpaw glanced over at the warriors. They were unruffled, but all of them except for Swoopstrike gazed at the apprentices sympathetically.

"You get more used to them," Beeclaw meowed.

"What can you all scent?" Grovepelt asked, continuing on with the lesson like nothing had happened.

"You mean besides the monster?" Autumnpaw said drily.

But, then all four of the apprentices fell silent as they scented the air. Frostpaw's brow furrowed as she tried to extract useful scents from the harsh, smoky tang that the monster had left hanging in the air.

"Wait... it smells strongly like ShadowClan!" Pinepaw meowed.

Frostpaw blinked in surprise, realizing that Pinepaw was right. Frostpaw was so used to the deep, rich ShadowClan scent from being surrounded by ShadowClan cats all the time, she had almost completely missed the fact that the scent again wreathed around

her here, almost as strongly as if they were in camp.

Grovepelt nodded.

"Good. We are standing by our scent-markers. They mark the border of our territory," he said.

Poolpaw inhaled deeply, his mouth open wide, and Frostpaw saw Pinepaw stifle a snicker at his gaping face.

"There is some faint other cat scent too!" Poolpaw declared.

Frostpaw sniffed carefully. The breeze had shifted and now scents were drifting over to them from the other side of the thunderpath. The wind carried the scent of the other cats, but the smell of them was unfamiliar to Frostpaw. Their scent was mustier than ShadowClan's sharp strong scent, with an edge of nuttiness, not unlike that of a squirrel.

"Yes. That's ThunderClan scent," Fogfur rumbled.

"They smell weird," Autumnpaw said, wrinkling up his nose.

"Their territory begins on the other side of the thunderpath," Grovepelt said, nodding at the trees beyond.

Frostpaw studied the trees, realizing that they looked a bit different from the forest on the ShadowClan side. The ThunderClan forest still had a couple of pine trees mixed in here or there, but Frostpaw noticed that the deeper into their territory that she gazed, further away from the thunderpath, the less pine trees there were. Instead there were more leafy ones.

"When I was a kit," Grovepelt meowed. "There was no thunderpath here, and ThunderClan's territory came right up to ours. But, then the two-legs came and created this thunderpath during my apprenticeship, splitting the two Clans' territories."

Frostpaw's eyes went wide. It was hard to imagine that the large, strange black stone of the thunderpath had not always been there. And, that it was actually so recent, it hadn't even existed at some point during the deputy's lifetime.

"I think the two-legs did us a favor," Swoopstrike growled. "At least the thunderpath keeps those mice-munchers over on their side, where they belong."

"The construction of it scared away prey for a season though," Grovepelt mused. "It was new-leaf, when the forest should have been bustling with prey emerging after the thaw, but all the creatures were scared off by the two-legs' racket. That was a hard season for ShadowClan, particularly coming right after a long leaf-bare, not unlike the one we just saw..."

Grovepelt shook himself, like he was trying to dislodge the clinging cobwebs of old memories.

"Nevermind that," he meowed. "That was a long time ago now. Beeclaw, refresh the scent-markings here, and let's keep going."

Grovepelt turned to look down at the apprentices and his wise eyes' sparkled a bit mischievously.

"I have a ShadowClan secret to show you four," he meowed. "But, you have to swear to not tell another cat from any of the other four Clans! I know apprentices like to brag at Gatherings, but this is one secret you *must not* tell. Do you promise?"

"I promise!" Pinepaw meowed, her amber eyes alight with eager delight to hear whatever the secret was.

"Me too!" Autumnpaw and Poolpaw chorused almost simultaneously.

Grovepelt's gaze flickered to Frostpaw's, waiting for her response.

"I—I promise," Frostpaw stammered quickly, feeling her fur flush with embarrassment.

Oh snake-dung, why did I hesitate? Will the deputy not believe me now? Frostpaw worried.

Luckily, Grovepelt either didn't notice or didn't seem bothered by Frostpaw's stuttering. He flicked his tail at the apprentices.

"Follow me," he meowed.

"Er—" Swoopstrike suddenly cut in, padding up to the deputy. "Are you sure showing them it now is such a good idea? Maybe we should wait a little while longer?"

"It's tradition that ShadowClan apprentices are told when they first start training," Grovepelt replied in a calm voice.

Swoopstrike's gaze flickered to Frostpaw for only a fraction of a heartbeat before he looked back at Grovepelt.

"I just think it might be a good idea to wait," Swoopstrike said, his voice becoming firmer. "Just so we know they can be trusted."

A gaping hole opened up inside of Frostpaw's chest.

He's worried about me. Swoopstrike doesn't trust me.

Pinepaw gave a disdainful sniff, clearly also understanding Swoopstrike's intent, and Frostpaw ducked her head in humiliation. Her stomach swirled with dozens of emotions—embarrassment, shame and a bit of anger that Swoopstrike thought she would betray the only home she had.

"Thank you for your opinion, Swoopstrike," Grovepelt said with the faintest hint of sarcasm in his voice. "But, we've trusted more talkative apprentices than these four in the past. I see no reason not to tell them."

Swoopstrike stiffly bowed his head, but Frostpaw could see he wasn't happy about Grovepelt's decision.

Grovepelt turned and continued forward, walking parallel to the thunderpath under the tree line. The rest of the patrol followed him one by one in a line.

"Here," Grovepelt meowed, ducking behind some bushes.

The apprentices followed him around the bush, but then Frostpaw almost ran smack into Poolpaw's hindquarters when he came to a sudden stop in front of her.

"Where did he go?" Poolpaw gasped.

Frostpaw wrenched her neck to peer around Poolpaw's flank, and she blinked in surprise to see that he was right. The deputy was nowhere to be seen. He appeared to have just vanished out of thin air.

"Over here!" Frostpaw heard Grovepelt meow.

Following the sound of his voice, the apprentices stuck their heads into a patch of nearby ferns.

"Woah!" Autumnpaw said.

Grovepelt's green eyes blinked up at them from a small tunnel, the entrance hidden by the dense thicket of ferns.

"This tunnel leads under the thunderpath," Grovepelt explained from below them. "And, it splits to head into both ThunderClan and WindClan territory. We usually go through it on the way to Gatherings too, so we don't have to cross over the thunderpath to get to Fourtrees."

Pinepaw flexed her claws in and out eagerly.

"That's so cool! We can get on to other Clans' territory without them even knowing!" she said, her voice vibrating with excitement.

"Do ThunderClan and WindClan know about this?" Autumnpaw asked.

"Not that we know of," Beeclaw replied. "That's why it's important this information stays within ShadowClan only."

Grovepelt hopped back out of the tunnel.

"That's right," he meowed, nodding in agreement with Beeclaw.

"Can we explore in the tunnel?" Poolpaw asked, his tail-tip twitching in excitement.

"I don't think ThunderClan or WindClan would appreciate four

ShadowClan apprentices gallivanting around on their territory," Fogfur meowed drily, with a faint purr.

"The tunnel is only used during Gatherings or if Sedgestar gives us explicit permission to do so," Grovepelt added in a firm voice.

"Like during battles?" Pinepaw asked, her black fur bristling in excitement and maybe a bit of nervousness.

"Yes," Grovepelt meowed.

The apprentices exchanged wide-eyed looks. Frostpaw was the first to look away, her stomach flipping.

How am I supposed to fight warriors from other Clans? she thought nervously.

She felt like she could barely fight a ball of moss, let alone a full sized, battle-trained warrior.

"Let's continue the tour of the territory," Grovepelt said, waving his tail to indicate for everyone to follow him.

The patrol padded off again, at a manageable trot this time, which Frostpaw's legs were grateful for. They turned away from the thunderpath, vanishing under the pines, and Frostpaw let out a quiet sigh as the stinging scent of the thunderpath faded behind them.

The group trekked through the forest in silence for a while. As they walked, Frostpaw began to wonder how the warriors knew where they were going. To her, all the dark pines seemed to look the same.

"Woah! Look at that!" Poolpaw gasped.

The patrol had padded into a small clearing in the forest. In the center of the clearing was an old, dead tree, but it still stood upright, like a withered ghost of what it must have been when it was alive. It was massive, with a twisted trunk, scorched black by some long-ago fire, and only some stubbed, gnarled branches at its crown— the rest of the branches evidently worn away by time or eaten by the fire that killed it. There was no other vegetation in the

ring surrounding the tree, besides ferns and moss that made the ground spongy and cool under Frostpaw's pads.

I wonder if the fire that killed the tree destroyed all the trees around it too, and they haven't grown back yet...

"This is the Burnt Sycamore," Grovepelt said.

"You'll all be very familiar with it soon," Beeclaw meowed. "Most of your battle training will be done in the clearing here."

"Cool!" Poolpaw yowled, dashing forward to scramble up one of the twisted roots, his black and white fur bristling with excitement.

He started to scale the side of the tree.

"Stop dashing over to every new thing you see and get back over here," Swoopstrike snapped, scraping his claws against the ground. "Stop acting like a little kit. You are ShadowClan apprentice now, have some dignity!"

At least it seems like Swoopstrike is grumpy with everyone... it's not just me. Frostpaw thought.

Still, Frostpaw's stomach twisted in sympathy for Poolpaw as he scrambled back over to the ShadowClan patrol, his head bowed in embarrassment.

"We've still got a lot of ground to cover," Grovepelt meowed. "Come on."

The patrol padded off again. Frostpaw's legs were starting to get tired from all the walking, but she didn't dare slacken her pace. Not with Swoopstrike only a few tail-lengths away, watching her like a hawk.

Frostpaw noticed the composition of the trees around her beginning to change. They shifted from mostly evergreen pines to large sycamores which were less dense, like every tree needed more space to spread their massive crowns. The ground under Frostpaw's feet squelched as it turned more damp, and around her tall grasses started to crop up, surprising Frostpaw, since the rest of the

territory she had seen contained little undergrowth. Frostpaw's ears pricked at the trickling sound of running water, but she saw no stream in sight. The pale green grasses around them became quite dense, and they stretched far above their heads, obscuring the path forward even as the patrol continued on. Frostpaw took another step forward, and suddenly the grasses parted, revealing a small stream.

"This water travels here all the way from RiverClan territory. It also goes through ThunderClan territory and is a part of the same river that forms the borders of RiverClan with both SkyClan and WindClan," Grovepelt meowed over his shoulder to the apprentices, as he stood at the very edge of the stream. "But, don't worry. The stream here is much more shallow and slow-moving than the river by RiverClan."

"You should get a drink if you like. We have more to go," Fogfur said in his deep, rumbling voice.

Frostpaw padded forward and took a moment to lap up some of the pure, cool water. When she raised her head, she saw Grovepelt nodding his head, gesturing across the stream.

"Let's go," he said.

"We have to walk through the water?" Autumnpaw asked incredulously, his eyes stretching wide.

"You can't be a ShadowClan cat and expect to always keep your paws dry," Beeclaw said with a hint of amusement in his voice. "Half the territory is marsh, and the other half is mud."

"Aren't there any places with stepping stones or fallen trees?" Poolpaw meowed hopefully.

"Yes, but they are out of our way," Swoopstrike snapped, tail twitching irritably. "Just do as the deputy says."

"You won't have to swim," Grovepelt reassured. "Follow me."

Grovepelt slipped into the water, but as he padded across, even at the deepest point, the water only reached half-way up his sides.

"See?" he said over his shoulder.

The rest of the cats followed. Frostpaw winced at the water soaked into her belly fur, but she didn't say one word of complaint as she padded across. On the other side of the stream, the marsh continued on for a bit, but as they got farther from the river, the pines reclaimed their hold on the forest.

They walked and walked for so long, Frostpaw was sure that they must have padded through the whole forest. Then Frostpaw blinked, startled to realize that she was right. The trees around them began to thin, then they suddenly stopped, and nothing but rolling golden fields stretched out in front of her. Frostpaw sniffed the air, she could smell the strong markers of ShadowClan scent again, but also the scents of different cats. Unlike the musty, nutty ThunderClan scent, this one was more earthy with an edge that smelt of rabbits. Or, was the scent of rabbits just drifting over to Frostpaw on the breeze?

"This must be WindClan territory?" Autumnpaw asked.

"Yes," Beeclaw replied with a nod.

Frostpaw gazed out at the expanse of fields before her and gave a small shiver. Just looking out there made her feel so exposed. There was no where to hide on the empty moor.

"Why would a cat what to live somewhere with no trees?" Frostpaw muttered, half to herself.

"That's because WindClan cats don't think like normal cats. Their heads are filled with cotton," Swoopstrike said with a disdainful sniff.

Frostpaw looked over at Swoopstrike in surprise, caught off guard by the fact that the warrior had managed to say something to her without growling it out through clenched fangs.

Swoopstrike's gaze met Frostpaw's, and he seemed to suddenly remember who it was he was talking to. Swoopstrike's ears flattened, and he looked away from her.

"Have the apprentices seen enough?" Swoopstrike snapped to Grovepelt. "We've been up and down and across the territory all day, and my stomach is yowling with hunger."

Grovepelt rolled his eyes.

"By StarClan, Swoopstrike, you've been complaining more than the apprentices all day," Grovepelt said.

Swoopstrike muttered something under his breath about not even wanting to go on this patrol in the first place. Grovepelt continued, ignoring him.

"The sun is heading down, so we will head back to camp, although I wanted to stop by the Carrionplace first," Grovepelt said.

"It's on the way back, so I'm sure that shouldn't be a problem for you, right Swoopstrike?" Grovepelt added with a sarcastic edge to his voice.

"Fine," Swoopstrike said in an audible voice this time.

Grovepelt turned and with a wave of his tail padded back into the trees, the rest of the patrol following him.

The sun was dipping towards the tops of the trees and their shadows were stretching long behind them by the time the group made it to the carrion-place. As they walked, the ground had grown more marshy again, and Frostpaw's nose wrinkled as her paws squelched in the mud.

Like the thunderpath, Frostpaw could smell the Carrionplace before she could see it. But, it reeked in a different way than the thunderpath did. While the thunderpath smelt sour and metallic, the Carrionplace smelt rotten. As they padded out of the trees, Frostpaw's eyes widened at the strange sight before her. There was a small stretch of marshy grass between the trees and a tall web of a woven silver material in front of the patrol that stretched to the left and to the right.

As Frostpaw followed the web with her eyes, she could see that it encircled the entire Carrionplace. It looked like to get in, the cats

would have to either climb over it or dig their way under. The Carrionplace itself was filled with piles of strange things. Some looked unnatural. They were shiny and metallic like the web or the pelt of the monster that they saw earlier. Other things Frostpaw could spot looked like rotting plants or rotting meat. But, mixed in with the rotting, there was a hint of a scent of good meat, a pervasive reek of rat, and a breeze of two-legs.

"There are so many things and weird scents. What is this place?" Autumnpaw meowed in confusion, echoing Frostpaw's thoughts.

"Two-legs come here every so often to leave things that they don't want in those piles," Beeclaw explained.

"We generally stay out of the Carrionplace," Grovepelt cautioned, shooting the apprentices a sharp look so they knew he was serious. "There are dozens of rats that live there. And, since two-legs are here sometimes too, it can be dangerous. There are also sometimes diseases..."

Grovepelt shook his head like he didn't want to think about it.

"Anyway, none of you are allowed to go in. *No one is* without special permission from Sedgestar. We avoid it if we can. But, it can be useful during starving leaf-bares when there is no prey in the forest because there are always rats and two-leg food to be found here. Luckily, we haven't had a bad enough leaf-bare to have to use it in seasons though," Grovepelt said.

The deputy turned and waved his tail for everyone to follow him.

"But, now let's head back to camp," he meowed from over his shoulder. "You've seen the landmarks of the territory, and you will become increasingly familiar with it through patrols and hunts."

Frostpaw cast a final look at the Carrionplace, and when she turned around, she had to pick up her pace to catch up with the rest of the patrol. As the group padded through the quickly darkening forest, Frostpaw sighed in relief when she saw the thorn barrier that surrounded camp come into view. Her paws were dragging with exhaustion, and her stomach clenched in hunger from not eating all

day. The group brushed through the thorn tunnel and quickly fragmented, each apprentice splitting off with their respective mentor. Frostpaw hesitantly turned to Swoopstrike, waiting for his orders.

Swoopstrike wasn't even looking at her. He just stared off at something in the middle distance, his gaze and face blank.

"Go eat something, then get to your nest," Swoopstrike said in a flat voice. "Training starts at dawn."

Frostpaw nodded, but he was already walking away, scowling faintly to himself. Frostpaw's stomach flipped nervously as she watched him go. She sighed quietly, a feeling of despair settling over her.

How am I going to put up with six moons of this?

Hunting

"Frostpaw!"

Frostpaw jerked awake in her nest to the sound of the harsh voice. Swoopstrike's black and silver striped head was peering into the bush, and he glared at her with annoyed green eyes.

"Get out here," he snapped. "Or are you planning on sleeping the whole day away?"

"N-no," Frostpaw stammered, scrambling to her paws.

Swoopstrike had already vanished back outside.

Frostpaw stood a little too quickly and the branches of the holly bush that formed the apprentices' den scraped her ears. Frostpaw flinched, ducking down, and stepping around her den-mates, she quickly scrambled out of the den.

It had only been a few sunrises since her apprentice ceremony, and she hadn't found training with Swoopstrike to have gotten any easier. She hadn't done much training at all with him either. So far, her days had consisted mostly of moss collection and border patrols. She knew that Poolpaw, Pinepaw, and Autumnpaw had already done some form of hunting or battle training... and the fact that she hadn't made her nervous.

Frostpaw's tail twitched anxiously.

Will Swoopstrike teach me anything at all? Is he not going to try, and then make me fail deliberately?

Frostpaw swallowed around the lump in her throat.

How will I prove myself if I'm never given the chance?

Swoopstrike was waiting for her by the thorn tunnel, his tail tip twitching faintly. It was still long before dawn, and it seemed like

most of the camp was still asleep. Frostpaw padded up to Swoopstrike, biting back a comment about how he said she was sleeping the day away, but the whole rest of the clan wasn't even up yet.

"We're going hunting today," Swoopstrike said, shooting Frostpaw a perceptive look. "I wanted an early start."

Frostpaw felt a surge of relief that they were finally going hunting, followed by a flash of surprise that Swoopstrike had been able to guess her thoughts about the morning so easily. She nodded mutely.

Can he read my mind?!

Swoopstrike stood and stretched deeply, his long legs reaching far out behind him. Frostpaw shifted impatiently from paw to paw as she waited for him to finish, and her stomach suddenly gave a low growl. Frostpaw winced in embarrassment, shooting Swoopstrike a look out of the corner of her eyes. She wasn't able to tell if his whiskers were twitching in amusement, or if that was just the wind.

"Hungry?" Swoopstrike quipped.

"A little," Frostpaw admitted.

"Good. It'll make your claws sharper. Let's get going," Swoopstrike said, finishing his stretch and bounding through the tunnel without another word, leaving Frostpaw to follow.

Frostpaw ran after her mentor, her paws flying as the two cats flashed through the still-dark forest. Once they were a little ways away from camp, Swoopstrike slowed rapidly, coming to an almost jarring stop. He turned to Frostpaw just as quickly, causing her to jump slightly in surprise.

"What prey can you scent?" Swoopstrike asked.

"Um..." Frostpaw meowed uncertainly.

She took a few hesitant sniffs of the air.

"Open your mouth and draw the scent over your tongue. It'll

heighten the smells," Swoopstrike said.

Frostpaw obeyed, closing her eyes for good measure to block out any visual distractions as she focused solely on scent. A hint of warm prey scent drifted over to her on the breeze, piercing its way out of the deep, sharp scent of pine that surrounded her.

"Mouse?" she meowed, her eyes flickering open.

Swoopstrike's tail twitched.

"Was that a question or do you scent it?" he asked, an edge of irritation to his meow.

"I scent it," Frostpaw said, her ears flattening slightly.

"Good," he said curtly. "So, go find it. But, first..."

Swoopstrike led Frostpaw to a patch of toadstools growing at the roots of a nearby pine. Swoopstrike flopped over and rolled in the patch for a few moments. Then he stood, gave his pelt a shake to dislodge any dirt that clung to it, and nodded at the now mangled patch of mushrooms to indicate for Frostpaw to do the same.

Frostpaw looked at the toadstools then at Swoopstrike, a bewildered expression on her face. Swoopstrike heaved a sigh of exasperation.

"The thing ShadowClan is best at is stalking, right?" He spoke slowly and in a tone like he was explaining the clans to a not-particularly bright kit. "Not even our prey see, hear or scent us. It's to disguise our scents."

Frostpaw bit her tongue against the annoyed snarl that threatened to creep across her muzzle and obediently rolled in the toadstools for a few moments. She stood and sniffed her pelt. She smelt just like a patch of mushrooms.

"I've never smelt any hunting patrol returning to camp reeking of mushrooms," Frostpaw muttered, half of her wondering if Swoopstrike had just made the whole thing up as an elaborate prank to embarrass her.

Swoopstrike didn't seem that immature, but there was no way to be sure.

"A quick grooming removes the scent easily," Swoopstrike said with a dismissive twitch of his tail. "Be sure you roll in something before every hunt. It doesn't always have to be mushrooms, any mildly smelly plant will do. Just make sure it's not an herb that Clearstream uses or she'll claw your whiskers off."

Frostpaw snorted quietly to herself. It was hard to imagine the mild-mannered medicine cat raising her voice, let alone clawing someone. Her apprentice Elmclaw on the other paw...

Swoopstrike flicked his tail at Frostpaw, snapping her out of her thoughts.

"Show me how you stalk," he said.

Frostpaw obediently slipped into the hunting crouch that she and the other kits had often practiced with Weaseltail.

Since ShadowClan territory had little undergrowth for cover, she was pressed as low to the ground as she could be to make her form as hidden as possible from any prey. Frostpaw also made sure her tail was held straight out behind her, in line with her spine, not sticking up to alert the prey, and not so low that it dragged on the ground. Frostpaw stalked forward a few fox-lengths to demonstrate.

"Walk quieter," Swoopstrike snapped.

Frostpaw laid her paws down as quietly as possible, doing her best to silently glide across the ground.

"Not terrible," Swoopstrike grunted. "We'll see how it holds up against real prey. Now, back to that mouse."

Swoopstrike had her take the lead and soon the two of them were slinking through the pine trees, following the mouse's scent trail. They slowed as the scent got stronger.

"Stick to the shadows," Swoopstrike whispered before nodding to Frostpaw to indicate she should go ahead.

Frostpaw breathed in deeply. The mouse scent was strong, although she still had no sight of it. She crept forward, careful to keep her paw-steps light, her eyes flittering across the forest floor. Her gaze locked ahead when she spotted a flicker of motion near the roots of an oak tree. She spotted a small brown mouse rooting around the leaves there, sniffing for insects. Frostpaw's mouth started to water, and her stomach clenched at the thought of food. Her tail almost began to twitch in excitement, but she stopped it just in time, before it could ruffle the leaves and alert the mouse to her presence.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Frostpaw started to creep forward. As Swoopstrike instructed, she stuck to the shadows of the trees that the now rising sun cast on the ground. Her approach was as silent as an owl's flight. The mouse seemed to have no idea that she was stalking it, and it obliviously continued its leaf rustling. Once Frostpaw was within pouncing distance, she paused for a moment to ready herself. Carefully judging the distance between her and her prey, Frostpaw bunched up her muscles and leapt. Her forepaws landed squarely down on the mouse, which let out a pained squeak before Frostpaw dropped her head down and snapped its neck with a quick bite.

I did it!

A rush of excitement surged through Frostpaw as she lifted her head with the mouse hanging limply from her jaws. She had managed to catch something on her first try! Frostpaw glanced up and felt some of her excitement fade as Swoopstrike padded up to her, frowning.

"Not bad, but you hesitated too much before pouncing," he said, tail-tip twitching. "If the mouse had decided to look up, it would've spotted you. You need to go right from stalking to leaping, no hesitation."

Frostpaw's whiskers drooped slightly, and she nodded. Swoopstrike lifted his nose to sniff the air. He nodded towards the mouse in Frostpaw's jaws.

"I'll take care of storing that," he meowed. "You keep on going, see what else you can find."

Frostpaw nodded again and dropped the mouse on the ground. She scented the air, then padded off into the forest. She continued to sniff as she walked, but she wasn't having luck picking up any prey scent. Frostpaw cast a glance over her shoulder. Swoopstrike hadn't caught up to her yet, and there seemed to be nothing but empty forest around her. Suddenly, the scent of lizard came in on the breeze. Frostpaw hesitated for a moment before shrugging and padding after the scent. She didn't care much for lizard herself, but some of her clan-mates preferred their meat to be scaly.

As Frostpaw rounded some trees, she spotted the lizard ahead, sunning itself in the morning light on a small pile of stones. Frostpaw crouched down low, quickly stalking up to the prey. She didn't hesitate this time before her pounce like Swoopstrike told her to, but she misjudged the distance. Frostpaw landed a little short of the lizard, which startled as it noticed her, starting to scamper away.

"Snake-dung!" Frostpaw cursed, scrambling forward to try to snag the lizard with her claws.

It slipped between the cracks of two stones and vanished. Frostpaw sat up, her tail-tip twitching in irritation.

So much for "no hesitation." How are you supposed to know how far to pounce if you don't take a moment to check?

Frostpaw looked around, but there was still no sign of Swoopstrike. Frostpaw sighed; at least he hadn't been around to witness her miss.

Frostpaw lingered by the stones for a few moments longer, seeing if he would appear, but Swoopstrike seemed to have vanished into the pine forest. Frostpaw's tail was slowly drooping.

What am I supposed to do without my mentor? Does he expect me to hunt alone?

Frostpaw clenched her jaw. If Swoopstrike wasn't going to show up to help her, she wouldn't just hang around the forest like a lost kit.

I guess he's not even going to try to train me. But, I don't care. I'll catch

a ton of prey to bring back to camp. That'll show him that I'm not useless.

Frostpaw set off again with renewed determination in her step.

The morning sun inched higher into the sky, shining golden light down through the pine needles. It was turning into a beautiful new-leaf day, but prey were sleepy this morning, and Frostpaw was approaching the WindClan border with nothing to show but one small frog that she stumbled upon in a puddle a little ways back.

Frostpaw scented the air and her heart picked up in excitement when she scented a bird.

Finally.

She fell into her crouch and following the scent trail.

The scent led her closer to the WindClan border. She could see the golden grass of the moor and swaths of purple heather peeking out between the trunks of the pines when she spotted the bird a few fox-lengths away from her. It was a robin on the marshy ground, pecking at an unlucky worm.

Frostpaw locked her eyes on the robin, hardly daring to breathe as to not disturb it as she stalked closer. The robin seemed very intent on its own meal though, and not on the approaching apprentice. Frostpaw was almost close enough to pounce. Her hindquarters wiggled as she prepared to leap...

Frostpaw's concentration was shattered by a boisterous voice calling from across the moor.

"ShadowClan! What are you doing so close to the border?!"

The loud voice startled both Frostpaw and the robin, and the bird took flight, shooting into the air and vanishing into the dense tangle of pine branches above with a loud alarm call. Frostpaw didn't even bother trying to leap after it, instead her head jerked up in shock, and she looked over to see a WindClan patrol streaking across the moor with a lanky light ginger tom in the lead.

"What's the matter, lizard got your tongue?" the ginger tom sneered. "I asked you what are you doing so close to our territory? Your rank ShadowClan scent is drifting all across the moor and scaring off our prey!"

It took Frostpaw a moment to understand that the cat was talking to *her,* and running over in her direction.

Frostpaw realized with a jolt that she was so used to thinking as the other cats in the Clan as "ShadowClan" and herself as not, that she forgot that anyone outside of the Clan would just see her as one of them.

Frostpaw quickly backed away from the approaching patrol, her pelt bristling slightly in fear. The WindClan cats were sprinting over to her so quickly, she was almost sure they would barrel straight into the forest and leap at her, but the cats came to a skidding stop just short of the border. Frostpaw continued to back away into the shadows of the pines, her heart thumping in her chest as she took in their fierce expressions. She slowly unsheathed her claws.

"Don't try to run away from me," the light ginger tom snarled, striding to the side so he could look directly at Frostpaw from around the trunks of the trees.

His gaze was as fierce as claws raking her pelt as he stared at her.

"If you've done nothing wrong, what do you have to be afraid of?" he spat.

"I didn't do anything... And, I'm not afraid," Frostpaw snarled in the best not-afraid voice she could manage, swallowing nervously as she eyed the four angry cats in the patrol.

"You look like you are," the ginger tom hissed, flattening his large ears. "You'd only be so scared if you're guilty of something."

"I'm not!" Frostpaw protested in a stronger voice, her gaze wide.

"So, what have you been doing? Trespassing? Prey-stealing?" the tom continued, ignoring her, his eyes furious, narrow slits.

Frostpaw dug her claws into the ground at the ridiculous accusations, feeling the first stirrings of anger appear in her chest to replace the fear.

"Nothing!" Frostpaw said, baring her teeth. "I wasn't on your territory!"

"Tell me the truth, you lying bog-breath!" the ginger tom spat, pacing at the border, his claws out and his tail lashing.

I was doing nothing wrong! I hadn't crossed the border!

A surge of white-hot anger filled Frostpaw at the injustice of it. The anger rushed over her and suddenly, she found words spilling out of her mouth seemingly before her mind could even process them.

"Why in StarClan's name would I want to be in WindClan territory, cotton-head?!" Frostpaw snarled. "It's barren and empty! There's nothing there but stupid rabbits and stupid rabbit-brained cats like you!"

"How *dare* you!" the ginger tom growled, all the fur down his back bristling as he took a pace forward, over the border.

Frostpaw startled in surprise as there was a sound behind her that sounded like a mixture between a snarl and a roar. Frostpaw crouched lower in terror and felt the fur on her head and back stir in a breeze as a silver blur leapt over her and charged up to the border. Frostpaw blinked in surprise, her fear fading as she recognized the silver and black pelt as Swoopstrike. All of his fur stood on end, making him look almost twice as big as normal. His green eyes had a wild glint to them, and his lips were drawn back in a snarl so terrifying that it even made the aggressive ginger WindClan tom quickly take a pace back, onto to WindClan side of the border. Swoopstrike shot straight up to the ginger tom, stopping just short of the scent-markers, where he arched his back and let out a furious hiss, his silver and black striped tail lashing from side to side.

"I knew WindClan cats were stupid, but I didn't think that you all were *this* stupid!" Swoopstrike hissed, tearing clumps of peat from

the ground with his claws. "First you harass my apprentice while she was hunting on *ShadowClan* land. Then you dare cross our border and trespass into our territory?!"

Swoopstrike locked his searing gaze on the ginger tom.

"WindClan's leader, the mighty Rabbitstar, crossing our border to try to attack an apprentice barely older than six moons with *no* battle training on ShadowClan's own territory!" Swoopstrike reiterated with a mocking sneer. "Oh this is good. I can't wait to hear what Sedgestar will say when I tell him about this!"

That's Rabbitstar!?

Frostpaw's eyes stretched wide with shock.

"She was close to the border," Rabbitstar snapped defensively, his ears flat against his head. "How do I know she wasn't prey-stealing?"

"She wasn't because I was watching her the whole time, cotton-brain!" Swoopstrike hissed, tail lashing impatiently.

Rabbitstar snorted, giving an exaggerated eye-roll.

"Yeah, okay. Like the word of two ShadowClan cats matters to me," he said.

Swoopstrike stilled suddenly, his once lashing tail now held stiff behind him.

"Well, I know our word will matter to Sedgestar," Swoopstrike said with an ominous growl, his eyes glinting with an unspoken threat.

Swoopstrike's implication didn't go unnoticed by WindClan's leader.

"Are you threatening me, Swoopstrike?" Rabbitstar asked, digging his claws into the ground.

"We have this saying in ShadowClan: Look before you leap because that worm might turn out to be a snake," Swoopstrike snapped. "You better watch yourself, Rabbitstar. Before you get bit."

With that, Swoopstrike curled his lip up at Rabbitstar in a final derisive snarl and whipped around, stalking back into the trees. As Swoopstrike padded past Frostpaw, he flicked his tail at her to indicate that she should follow. Frostpaw was eager to obey, scrambling after him and letting out a quiet sigh as the dense pines quickly hid the WindClan patrol from her sight.

"We're going back to camp and telling Sedgestar about this immediately," Swoopstrike growled in a voice that vibrated with rage. "That cotton-brained Rabbitstar has really done it this time! Who does he think he is? We'll *flay* him and leave that shiny orange pelt of his hanging on a branch for the buzzards to pick clean."

Frostpaw nodded along silently, keeping her mouth shut in fear that if she said anything that it turned out he disagreed with, her mentor would turn his fury onto her.

Frostpaw felt some of the tension drain from her shoulders as they stalked further into ShadowClan territory and away from the moors' border. Swoopstrike might not be her favorite cat in the forest, but she sure had been happy to see him springing out of the shadows to rescue her from WindClan.

Swoopstrike glanced at Frostpaw out of the corner of his eye.

"You did well standing up to them," Swoopstrike muttered the compliment grudgingly in a softer voice.

He glanced away from her, and his voice turned back to a harsh tone that Frostpaw was much more familiar with.

"But, you should've scented them coming before they saw you, and then vanished back into the trees," Swoopstrike snapped. "There's no need to stir up fights unnecessarily. You can learn much more about our enemies by watching them from the shadows. Cats that don't know they're being watched have loose tongues. Of course, there was nothing wrong with you hunting by the border, but Rabbitstar is extremely hot-headed and he'd claw anyone outside of WindClan up just for looking at him funny."

Frostpaw resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

I wonder what other cat that sounds like...

But, nevertheless, Frostpaw felt a spark of warmth appear in her chest at the advice and *compliment* she got from Swoopstrike.

Frankly, she was shocked that it appeared like Swoopstrike was even trying to train her at all. After he abandoned her to hunt alone, she had been convinced that the warrior wasn't even going to try. But, it turned out he had been watching her the whole time. Was him leaving her to hunt alone all a part of his training strategy and not just cruelty?

...I wonder, if I can get Swoopstrike to like me, then will everyone else in ShadowClan follow suit?

Well, he doesn't even have to like me, Frostpaw amended, shooting a quick look at Swoopstrike's scowling face. *But, tolerate me at least.*

The rest of the trek back to camp was spent in silence. Swoopstrike spent the time quietly fuming over WindClan, occasionally muttering curses about Rabbitstar under his breath, while Frostpaw tried to work out her plan to win Swoopstrike's favor. It was funny, only a few pawfuls of sunrises ago, before she was an apprentice, the task of making Swoopstrike like her would not only have seemed close to impossible, but also something that she saw no point in pursuing. But, now, she already had one compliment in her favor, and the task seemed much less insurmountable.

Frostpaw found Snakeeyes' words coming back to her again.

"You will have to fight twice as hard, hunt twice as much, run twice as far as them to prove yourself."

...I can do it. Frostpaw thought, determination filling her.

She felt a jolt of surprise at the strength of the feeling. She didn't realize until now how much she *wanted* this. She wanted ShadowClan to accept her. She wanted the easy companionship of friends. The sense of blind comfort that she had as a young kit with her mother, knowing that someone was there that she could rely on no matter what. As much as Frostpaw liked Redclaw and the other

queens, she knew that she never gave them the chance to be that for her.

Frostpaw felt a flash of guilt.

She knew Redclaw was a good cat, who defended and loved Frostpaw, but Frostpaw had closed herself away, in fear that if she let her in, she would be replacing May... or even worse, she feared that if she let herself love Redclaw, it would destroy her if she lost her like she lost May. But, in this effort to protect herself, Frostpaw had cut herself off to *everyone.* And, now... she was so lonely.

The feeling surged over her so powerfully, Frostpaw bit the insides of her cheek to stop herself from suddenly wailing like a lost kit.

She and Swoopstrike finally made it back to camp, and they padded inside through the thorn tunnel, the brambles scraping Frostpaw's fur as she pushed her way through. In the center of camp, Swoopstrike gestured for Frostpaw to stay there as he headed alone towards the entrance of the leader's den nestled in the Oak Tree's roots. Frostpaw stood in the middle of the camp. Her thoughts had drifted far from the confrontation with WindClan, and now she just felt utterly lost.

What do I do? Where do I even begin?

Her gaze flickered to over by the fresh-kill pile, where she spotted Autumnpaw's familiar fluffy dark ginger and white pelt. He was talking with Murmurkit and Mosskit, and Frostpaw felt the turmoil in her heart ease slightly.

At least... I'm not entirely alone.

She may have not let Redclaw or Autumnpaw in as much as she should've. But, the two of them seemed to care for her anyways. Weaseltail, Larkfoot, and Amberberry were also kind to her. And, Poolpaw was tolerable at the times he wasn't being an annoying frog-brain. And, Pinepaw... well Frostpaw supposed she would work on her along with Swoopstrike.

Frostpaw padded towards Autumnpaw, and her ears pricked as

snippets of his conversation drifted over to her. Murmurkit and Mosskit were begging him to show them his hunting crouch or some battle moves. Autumnpaw was bragging with a playful glint in his amber eyes about the territory that he explored. Autumnpaw's gaze flicked up and he spotted Frostpaw approaching them.

"Oh, hi Frostpaw!" Autumnpaw meowed cheerfully. "I didn't expect you to be back from your hunting lessons so soon."

"Hi Autumnpaw," Frostpaw greeted him.

She turned towards the kits.

"Hi Murmurkit. Hi Mosskit," she added.

The two of them blinked at her in surprise. Frostpaw felt her fur start to flush with embarrassed heat as she realized that the whole time that they were in the nursery together, she barely said more than a few words to them, and never asked to play or anything...

No wonder they look so surprised.

"Hi Frostpaw," Murmurkit said quietly.

"Autumnpaw was telling us about how much territory he's seen!" Mosskit meowed excitedly, seemingly not bothered by Frostpaw's sudden acknowledgement of her and her sister. "Have you seen it too?"

"Yeah, she went on the same tour as I did," Autumnpaw said. "Our mentors showed us *everything."*

Mosskit's eyes shone in excitement.

"Have you seen any cats from the other Clans? What are they like?" she asked, particularly bouncing with energy.

"Well... no, not yet," Autumnpaw meowed, his ears dropping in disappointment.

Frostpaw hesitated. Autumnpaw glanced over to her, his brow furrowing as he read her expression.

"Wait... have you seen them? Did something happen today? Is that why you are back already?" Autumnpaw asked, his ears snapping back up as he suddenly became as excited as Mosskit.

Now all three of them turned to her, their eyes wide and eager.

"Well..." Frostpaw said, her heart racing at the undivided attention the three cats were showing her. "Swoopstrike is talking to Sedgestar. I don't know if he wants me to tell anyone until Sedgestar decides what to do..."

"What?!" Autumnpaw exclaimed, his mouth comically gaping open. "Your mentor's talking to Sedgestar about it!? I'm dying of curiosity now. Now you have you tell us!"

"We won't tell anyone," Murmurkit promised.

"Please!" Mosskit added.

Frostpaw's tail-tip twitched indecisively. She didn't want Swoopstrike to get mad at her, especially not when she'd just decided she wanted him to like her. But, also, these three cats were looking at her so eagerly. They were happy to hear her talk; they wanted to know what she had to say... How many times had that happened to her before?

"Okay," she finally conceded. "I saw a WindClan patrol today."

"And...?" Autumnpaw prompted. "Swoopstrike wouldn't be talking to Sedgestar right now, if you just saw them and nothing else happened."

"I was hunting near the border, and they came over to me because they were suspicious that I was too close to their territory. Rabbitstar stepped over the border, acting like he might attack me, before Swoopstrike stepped in and stopped him," Frostpaw said, the words spilling out of her rapidly.

"Holy StarClan!" Autumnpaw exclaimed, his eyes as wide as moons. "The leader of WindClan tried to attack you?!"

Frostpaw shrugged.

"He could've been just trying to scare me. I guess I don't know if he was *actually* going to," Frostpaw said.

She fell into a thoughtful silence for a moment.

"Although, maybe. I got him mad because I called him rabbit-brained," she added.

"You called WindClan's leader rabbit-brained?" Murmurkit said with a purr.

Mosskit and Autumnpaw joined in with *mrrows* of laughter, and Frostpaw's pelt flushed with heat.

"Well at the time, I didn't know that it was *Rabbitstar* that I called *rabbit*-brained," Frostpaw said.

"That's hilarious," Autumnpaw said, gasping for breath between his deep rumbling laughs.

"I can't believe you've only been apprentices for a few sunrises and you're already doing so many cool things!" Mosskit added with a jealous sigh.

"Well you and Murmurkit are only about a moon younger than us," Frostpaw pointed out. "So, you two will be apprentices very soon too."

"Gossiping already?"

Frostpaw jumped guiltily at the sound of Swoopstrike's rasping voice from behind her. She turned around quickly to face him, her pelt prickling in apprehension.

"Swoopstrike! I'm sorry, I was just—"

Swoopstrike interrupted her with a shake of his head.

"Doesn't matter," he meowed curtly. "Sedgestar is making an announcement to the whole Clan about WindClan this evening. And, he plans on confronting them at the gathering tonight, so everyone in the forest will know soon enough."

"Are you and Frostpaw going to the gathering?" Mosskit asked Swoopstrike, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Yes," Swoopstrike said. "Sedgestar said all of the apprentices are going. ShadowClan has the most apprentices and warriors out of all of the Clans right now. Sedgestar wants make sure everyone knows it. We're giving a show of strength."

Frostpaw's stomach flipped nervously.

I'm going to a gathering? Tonight? There will be so many cats there. Not to mention Rabbitstar and the WindClan cats that wanted to rip my pelt off today...

Swoopstrike turned to Frostpaw.

"Change the elders' nests and bring them some fresh-kill. Then get something to eat yourself and rest up for the gathering," Swoopstrike said sharply.

Then he turned and padded out of camp without so much as another word. Frostpaw watched him go, wondering where he was off to, but her thoughts were distracted by Autumnpaw giving her side an enthusiastic shove.

"Can you believe it!" he meowed excitedly. "Our first gathering already! Tonight! I can't wait to tell Poolpaw and Pinepaw!"

Frostpaw nodded, but her paws pricked with nervousness at the thought of seeing Rabbitstar and the other WindClan warriors again.

What is Sedgestar going to do?

The Gathering

Frostpaw felt distracted during her duties all day. When she was changing the elders' bedding, she barely noticed how Flymask muttered unhappily about a rogue in the Clan while she fetched him fresh moss for his nest and scraped out the old, musty smelling stuff.

Once she finished, she padded out of the elders' den to give her pelt a quick grooming to remove the bits of moss that clung to her fur. She spotted Autumnpaw with Poolpaw and Pinepaw near the fresh-kill pile. Like he could feel her gaze on him, Autumnpaw raised his head and glanced over at Frostpaw, waving his tail at her to gesture for her to come over to them. Frostpaw rose to her paws and obeyed, pretending not to hear Pinepaw's sigh of disappointment as she padded up to the siblings.

"Have you eaten yet?" Autumnpaw meowed, a rabbit at his paws. "Remember, Swoopstrike said we need to eat before we head to the gathering! Do you want to share this with me?"

Frostpaw looked at the prey with curiosity. Not many rabbits found their way into ShadowClan's pine forest and marshes

"Sure," Frostpaw meowed.

She bent down and took a bite of the rabbit.

"It's good," she meowed. "I haven't had rabbit before."

"Well then move your fluffy tail over and let me try!" Autumnpaw said with a purr of amusement.

Frostpaw obediently scooted over and Autumnpaw tucked into the prey.

"It *is* good," he mumbled through a mouthful of meat. "And that'll

show WindClan! We got one of their rabbits."

"And, why do we care about WindClan?" Pinepaw asked with a wrinkle of her nose.

"Did you hear?" Autumnpaw meowed, an excited gleam in his amber eyes. "Frostpaw got into a confrontation with WindClan today!"

"Really?" Poolpaw asked, turning to Frostpaw.

Pinepaw flattened her ears.

"Are you sure she's just not making it all up?" Pinepaw sniffed.

Frostpaw shrugged, not in the mood to argue with the difficult she-cat.

"Sedgestar is going to make an announcement about it before we leave for the gathering," Frostpaw meowed. "So, you'll hear about it soon enough."

Frostpaw quickly finished off her half of the rabbit before excusing herself to the apprentices' den to take a nap before the gathering.

She pushed her way through the unfriendly looking holly bush that guarded the den and into the much cozier moss-lined interior. Damppaw was the only other apprentice in the den, and he was sound asleep in his nest. Frostpaw tiptoed around him, careful not to wake him up and have her ears clawed off by him for being an annoying rogue that stomped around as loudly as a badger. Luckily, the tom remained fast asleep, and she made it to her nest without incident. Frostpaw's nest was pushed up against the wall of the den, next to the holly bush's branches. It was more drafty than the nests more close to the center of the den, but it was new-leaf so the air wasn't too cold, and Frostpaw's long pelt was thick. Autumnpaw's, Poolpaw's and Pinepaw's nests were more close to the center of the den, but Damppaw and Dewpaw as the oldest apprentices, got the best nests, right in the center. Frostpaw supposed that she could try to move her nest closer to her younger den-mates. She didn't think Autumnpaw, Poolpaw or Dewpaw would mind, but she hadn't

thought it worth the fight that it would probably create with Pinepaw and Damppaw.

So, Frostpaw settled into her cramped little nest pushed up against the holly's branches, closed her eyes and let the dark wave of sleep wash over her.

Frostpaw was jerked awake by a paw shaking her shoulder. She blinked her eyes open, the fluffy red form standing over her coming into focus as the sleep faded from her vision.

"The sun is starting to set," Autumnpaw meowed. "I think Sedgestar is going to call a clan meeting soon."

Anxiety flashed through Frostpaw for a moment as she imagined Sedgestar talking about her to the whole clan, but she did her best to push the feeling away and ignore it.

"Coming," Frostpaw muttered through a wide yawn.

She stumbled to her paws, and as Autumnpaw excitedly bounded out of the den, she followed more slowly.

As Frostpaw exited the holly bush, she scanned the camp, spotting Sedgestar sitting at the base of Clanrock, close to the moss-covered entrance to the medicine cat's den. He sat in a small circle with Grovepelt, Emberflower, Clearstream, and Elmclaw. Sedgestar seemed to be listening intently to something Clearstream was saying, nodding along to his medicine cat's words.

Frostpaw glanced away from him and looked around camp. There seemed to be a lot of cats milling about, probably eager to know who would be going to the gathering. Frostpaw padded over to where Autumnpaw and the rest of the other apprentices were sitting, taking a seat a little on the outskirts of the group.

The sun had just dipped below the horizon when Sedgestar excused himself from his inner circle of advisors and bounded to the top of the Clanrock, his eyes bright.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath Clanrock for a clan meeting!" Sedgestar announced.

Frostpaw noticed that the words were really more ceremonial than anything else because almost everyone was already hanging out in camp, expecting some sort of announcement before the gathering. But, the cats quieted down and turned towards their leader.

Sedgestar was quiet for a moment like he was getting his thoughts in order.

"As you all know," Sedgestar began. "Tonight is a night of the full-moon. But, before we leave for the gathering, there are some important things that everyone should hear."

Sedgestar hesitated for a moment, his brown-striped tail twitching.

"WindClan and its leader Rabbitstar have insulted us today." Sedgestar's voice became cold. "Rabbitstar blatantly crossed our borders in an attempt to attack Frostpaw while she and Swoopstrike were hunting near the WindClan border. Swoopstrike managed to drive Rabbitstar back onto his own land, but this insult to us cannot stand."

Yowls of anger rose up from the crowd.

"Who does Rabbitstar think he is?!" Greytail hissed, baring her yellowed fangs.

"At least WindClan's old leader had some respect for ShadowClan," Flymask complained to his den-mates. "Rabbitstar has less sense than a kit!"

"If I was a few seasons younger, I'd teach that scrawny tom a lesson!" Treefur growled in agreement, digging his claws into the ground.

Sedgestar waved his tail for silence. Reluctantly the clan settled down. Darkpelt got to his paws, gazing up at Sedgestar.

"What are we going to do about them?" Darkpelt growled, his black fur bristling.

"WindClan cannot face us in battle," Sedgestar rumbled in a low, threatening voice. "If they have any sense, they must know that. We

have them in numbers and strength."

There was a little bit of cheering from the crowd. Frostpaw glanced over at her den-mates. Pinepaw, Damppaw, and Poolpaw were among the cheerers; they gazed up at Sedgestar with bright eyes.

"...Because of this, I hope to solve this transgression without conflict," Sedgestar continued over the cheering of the crowd.

The cheering quickly died away, and some cats gazed up at Sedgestar in confusion.

"Why?" Marshnose protested, rising to his paws. "If we can beat them in battle, why don't we? That will teach them a lesson."

"Let's shred them!" Damppaw snarled in support of his mentor.

Sedgestar opened his mouth to respond, but before he could, Hootflight yowled out an agreement with Damppaw and Marshnose, which was echoed by Dustleap and Pinepaw.

"Enough! Your leader speaks!" Darkpelt shouted above the yowling, sparing a specific stern glance towards his son, Damppaw.

Damppaw dipped his head in deference to his father, and Darkpelt's green gaze softened with affection. Sedgestar nodded to Darkpelt gratefully.

"Thank you Darkpelt. And, Marshnose, you're not wrong," Sedgestar said, glancing over at him. "But, Rabbitstar didn't steal any prey or attack anyone, even though he may have tried. I would rather not risk injuring my warriors for a relatively small insult. Granted, we cannot allow this behavior from WindClan to continue because then it could escalate to something much worse. So, if Rabbitstar doesn't change his ways, a battle will be inevitable... but at least for right now, it isn't."

Marshnose sat down without another word of protest, but he was still frowning slightly. Frostpaw glanced over at Swoopstrike to see what his expression looked like, wondering where her mentor's opinion fell, but his face was unreadable.

"I will demand an apology from Rabbitstar tonight in front of the other leaders," Sedgestar continued. "Rabbitstar insulted our pride by trespassing, so he will have to swallow his pride and humble himself before us, the other four clans, and StarClan to make up for it. We will also show Rabbitstar that we are strong and not to be trifled with. I want all of the apprentices and their mentors to come to the gathering tonight. Emberflower, Hootflight, Darkpelt, Leafbreeze, Redclaw and Weaseltail will come too."

The named cats rose to their paws as Sedgestar bounded down from Clanrock, indicating that the meeting was over.

"We will head out when it's fully dark," Sedgestar meowed to the standing group.

Frostpaw gazed at the large group of cats. She knew from Swoopstrike that ShadowClan was the biggest clan in the forest right now, and it seemed that Sedgestar wanted to make sure WindClan was well aware of that since he had chosen a huge group of warriors to go. Autumnpaw turned around and his gaze met Frostpaw's. He bounded over to her, his fur prickling with excitement.

"WindClan won't even know what hit them!" he said.

After sunset, the large group headed off, silently trekking through the dark forest.

Frostpaw glanced around. Despite the full moon, the dense canopy of pine branches above them blotted out most of the light, and all she could make out of her clan-mates were flickers of shadows here and there, and flashes of reflective eyes. The large group also moved with surprising quietness, no one spoke or hardly made a sound at all. Frostpaw had to consciously lay her paws as carefully and quietly as she could on the ground as they walked, not wanting to be the only one with noisy footfalls.

As they padded past the Burnt Sycamore, Frostpaw recognized the direction they were heading; towards the ThunderClan border.

We must be going to the tunnel. Grovepelt said it was used to get to

gatherings.

Frostpaw's hunch was right, and soon the acidic tang of the thunderpath hung in the air as Sedgestar led the group towards the tunnel. Sedgestar was the first to enter the black hole that yawned in the earth, and the last thing Frostpaw saw was his brown-striped tail flicking to indicate for the group to follow before that too was swallowed by the shadows. Frostpaw waited her turn as the patrol streamed through the tunnel one by one. After Swoopstrike vanished inside, Frostpaw padded up to the tunnel and forced herself not to hesitate as she strode inside.

She blinked. It was pitch black down there, and Frostpaw was guided forward only by her whiskers. After walking for a short while, two breezes stirred on her whiskers from different directions, which seemed to indicate a split in the tunnel ahead. Frostpaw scented the air, and sure enough through the stinging scent of the thunderpath, she seemed to detect the sweet scent of heather from the moorland in one direction, and the musky scent of trees in another. Her clan-mates scent headed towards the trees, so Frostpaw continued on that way.

Pale moonlight flickered ahead, heralding the end of the tunnel. As Frostpaw exited it, she had to crouch down low under a prickly bramble bush that grew hunched over the entrance, hiding it from view. As Frostpaw wiggled out from under the bush, she blinked as she emerged back into the outside world. But, this forest wasn't the familiar one that she had just been walking through. The pines were gone, replaced with leafy trees and dense undergrowth in every direction. Frostpaw's pelt prickled uncomfortably as she looked around. She didn't like not being able to see the area around her; it made her feel boxed in.

Sedgestar and the rest of the patrol were waiting a few fox-lengths away from the bramble bush for everyone to appear from the mouth of the tunnel. Frostpaw padded over to them, and they waited until Leafbreeze, the last in the patrol emerged. Then Sedgestar waved his tail, and the group was off again. It was a short walk through the woods to a crest of a hill, where Sedgestar and the rest of the patrol lingered. Frostpaw looked down the hill, and her eyes widened at the sight before her.

Four massive oak trees soared towards the sky down in the hollow at the base of the hill. The trees were ringed by a dense circle of vegetation, but she could see the forms of cats flickering through the undergrowth in the clearing between the trees. Right in the center of the clearing, a huge boulder jutted upwards. It was even bigger than Clanrock, and it made an imposing lone figure; the cats beside it looked tiny ants in comparison.

Sedgestar gave a flick of his tail, and like a surging river, ShadowClan ran down the hill together. Frostpaw was careful to keep up with her clan-mates, not wanting to be the only one lingering behind on the hill. As soon as the cats brushed through the vegetation and into the clearing, the silent spell that had seemed to have been hanging over the patrol was broken. Frostpaw watched her clan-mates happily chatting with each other, some even headed off alone into the crowd, meowing hellos at acquaintances from other Clans. Frostpaw hung back, taking in the huge groups of cats, unsure of where to begin.

Frostpaw was glad to see that Autumnpaw, Poolpaw, and Pinepaw were also lingering by the edge, looking as overwhelmed as she felt. Frostpaw padded over to them and Autumnpaw greeted her with a quick purr.

"Where do we start?" Poolpaw gasped, unabashedly staring into the crowd.

"The crowd can seem a bit overwhelming your first gathering," Redclaw purred, padding up to the group of apprentices. "Why don't you try talking to some apprentices from different clans? The night of the full moon is a truce, so there's no need to worry about getting your fur clawed."

"I'm not worried!" Pinepaw huffed, shaking out her dark coat. "But, I don't want to talk to any *WindClan* apprentices. And, I don't know why Sedgestar is even bothering talking to them tonight! They're trespassers that need to be taught a lesson!"

Redclaw shot her daughter a sharp look.

"Sedgestar is very wise. He understands that there are times when

battle isn't necessary. And, besides..." Redclaw said, swatting one of Pinepaw's ears with an affectionate flick of her tail. "If I know anything about Rabbitstar... having to apologize in front of all of the Clans will be worse for him than any battle!"

Frostpaw purred alongside the three siblings. Redclaw leaned towards them, her green gazes sparkling.

"Now go along and have some fun before the leaders hog the whole gathering talking about themselves," she added in a loud whisper.

Redclaw padded away, meowing hello to a queen that smelt of ThunderClan.

"I see Damppaw with some RiverClan cats!" Pinepaw meowed, her gaze lighting up. "I'm going to sit with them."

Pinepaw shot a glance back at the other apprentices.

"You two can join me if you want," she said pointedly to Autumnpaw and Poolpaw, ignoring Frostpaw.

"And, listen to Damppaw boast all night about how he's the greatest hunter in the whole forest?" Autumnpaw meowed with a wrinkle of his nose. "No thanks."

Poolpaw snickered, while Pinepaw flicked her tail, giving a sniff.

"Suit yourself," she meowed, padding off into the crowd.

"Let's go find some apprentices to talk to like Redclaw said," Autumnpaw meowed.

Poolpaw nodded in agreement, and Autumnpaw turned to Frostpaw.

"Are you coming?" he meowed.

Frostpaw was still gazing at the big crowd, but she gave her head a shake to snap herself out of it.

"Yeah," she meowed.

Autumnpaw led the way, padding intrepidly into the crowd. Poolpaw followed behind him, with Frostpaw taking the rear. The crowd of cats was dense, however, and soon Frostpaw got separated from the brothers, losing track of Poolpaw's black and white pelt.

Frostpaw's pace slowed, and she hesitantly scented the air, but it was hard to decipher Poolpaw's and Autumnpaw's scents from the scents of so many other cats and clans packed in so closely together. Frostpaw just picked the general direction they were padding in and continued that way, hoping that she'd be able to spot them once she got to an area where the crowd was less dense. Frostpaw brushed around a large tabby, and—

"...May?"

The name was whispered in a shocked, hushed voice. It was so quiet that Frostpaw's ears barely deciphered it among the sounds of so many cats chatting together. But, although the voice had been soft, the familiar word cut Frostpaw down to her heart like an ice-cold claw, sending a chill racing through her body as if she had fallen into a river of freezing water. Frostpaw whipped around towards the voice, and out of the crowd of cats her gaze fell on a large white tom. He was a few fox-lengths away from her, staring at her with wide green eyes, looking like he just saw a ghost. Their gazes locked together.

"...Who are you?" Frostpaw asked.

Her voice trembled slightly, and she felt her heart hammering in her chest.

The fluffy white tom blinked and gave his head a sharp shake like he was snapping himself out of a trance.

"My mistake," he meowed quickly, looking away from her. "For a moment, I thought you were someone else."

"How do you know that name?" Frostpaw asked.

Her voice was hushed, but it reverberated with intensity as she took a step towards him.

The white tom didn't respond. Instead he turned and padded into the crowd, his form rapidly getting lost in the sea of pelts. Frostpaw took another step in his direction, about to follow him, when a different voice interrupted her.

"Who were you just talking to?"

Swoopstrike materialized at Frostpaw's side, causing her to jump slightly.

"I—I don't know," she stammered. "I didn't get his name."

Swoopstrike shot her a look from narrowed eyes, but then his gaze flickered from her to the cats around them. Frostpaw and Swoopstrike had drawn the attention of some neighboring WindClan cats, and now they were staring daggers at the mentor and apprentice.

"That's the weird-furred apprentice that was at our border today," a dark tabby WindClan warrior said, in a voice deliberately loud enough to be overheard by Frostpaw.

A few other WindClan cats hissed at them.

"The gathering will be starting soon," Swoopstrike said to Frostpaw, ignoring the WindClan cats besides shooting them a scorching look. "Let's go sit with our Clan. Stay close to me."

Frostpaw nodded.

I wonder if he wants me to stay close to protect me from the WindClan cats. Or, if he doesn't trust me to not spill ShadowClan secrets like the one about the tunnel...

Frostpaw followed Swoopstrike through the crowd, over to where ShadowClan was loosely grouped, with some unfamiliar cats from the other clans mixed in. But, Frostpaw couldn't put the white cat out of her mind.

How does he know my mother's name? Did May know about other Clans besides ShadowClan?

An image of her mother appeared in Frostpaw's mind. She saw her soft-furred form, her cream colored body, her grey tail and legs, and her grey masked face with a kind expression.

Frostpaw looked down at her feet. She wasn't surprised that the white tom had mistaken her for her mother. She looked just like her. There were some differences of course, like Frostpaw's legs were grey tabby striped instead of solid colored, and she had white toes. And, she knew from the glimpses she could get of her reflection in pools of water that her grey face was also striped and she had a white chin. But, the two of them were clearly kin. Especially considering the fact that it seemed like no other cat in the forest had May's and Frostpaw's coloring.

Frostpaw wished that she could see May again. She was just realizing that she knew almost nothing about her own mother. Frostpaw had no idea where she came from, or how she knew the Clans, or how she knew that white cat.

As she and Swoopstrike approached their clan-mates, Autumnpaw, who was sitting by Poolpaw and Dewpaw, and an apprentice Frostpaw didn't recognize, waved his tail at Frostpaw, gesturing for her to come sit by him. Frostpaw glanced over at Swoopstrike for permission, and he nodded. Frostpaw padded over to her den-mates.

"There you are!" Autumnpaw meowed cheerfully. "You must have gotten lost!"

Frostpaw just nodded, deciding not to say anything about her strange encounter with the white cat just yet, and she took a seat next to Autumnpaw.

"Hello," the unfamiliar brown tabby apprentice meowed from behind Frostpaw as she settled down. "My name is Larchpaw. I'm a SkyClan apprentice."

"I'm Frostpaw. ShadowClan," Frostpaw meowed, turning back to look at her. "This is my first gathering."

"Mine too!" Larchpaw meowed, her tail curling up happily.

She shot Frostpaw a shy look.

"Can I just say your fur is so pretty! How do you only have grey on your face and legs like that?" Larchpaw purred.

Frostpaw felt her fur flush with heat.

"I don't know... I was just born like this I guess," she mumbled.

Frostpaw, her ears still warm, turned to look back forward towards the Great Rock. As she did so, she caught a wave of Larchpaw's scent. She smelt like windblown trees, and Frostpaw was startled to realize that she had picked up a flash of that same scent from the white tom she had spoken to earlier.

Frostpaw was pulled out of her thoughts when Autumnpaw leaned towards her.

"Which one is Rabbitstar?" Autumnpaw whispered to Frostpaw, looking up at the five cats perched on the massive rock that jutted up in the middle of the clearing.

"The ginger furred one," Frostpaw said, her gaze flickering to Rabbitstar.

He stood a little ways away from the other leaders, at the edge of the boulder. Frostpaw's gaze scanned the rest of the cats there. Sedgestar sat right in the middle, two cats on either side of him. Frostpaw thought he looked calm and collected, with his long tail wrapped neatly around his paws and his head held high, cutting a regal figure against the dark sky. To Sedgestar's left, between him and Rabbitstar, was a sleek grey tabby she-cat. To Sedgestar's right were two toms, one a pale brown, and the other a light grey.

Frostpaw's gaze drifted downwards. At the base of the Great Rock sat the deputies. Frostpaw's gaze skimmed over the familiar fur of Grovepelt as she eyed a brown tom, a golden tabby she-cat, a tabby tom, and...

A jolt ran through her as she spotted the white tom sitting there with the other deputies.

Is the white cat SkyClan's deputy?

"I know RiverClan's leader, Willowstar, is a she-cat so she must be the grey tabby next to Sedgestar," Autumnpaw murmured to Frostpaw. "That means ThunderClan's and SkyClan's leaders are on the toms on Sedgestar's other side, but I don't know which one's which."

"ThunderClan's leader, Morningstar, is the grey tom," Dewpaw meowed, overhearing Autumnpaw. "And, SkyClan's leader, Fennelstar is the pale brown one with bushy fur."

"Oh, thanks," Autumnpaw said with a purr of laughter. "I forgot that you've been to a gathering before."

"Who are the deputies?" Frostpaw asked quickly.

"The tabby tom is RiverClan's, Perchpelt. The brown tom, there, is Acornear, from ThunderClan. Then there's Wheatfur from WindClan. She's the golden one. And, the white one is Paledusk from SkyClan," Dewpaw said, rattling off the names quickly, and flicking her tail in the direction of each to indicate as she said their names.

Why would the SkyClan deputy know my mother? Frostpaw thought, her brow furrowing.

"Paledusk has only been our deputy for a few moons," Larchpaw meowed helpfully from behind Frostpaw. "Robinsong died of green-cough during leafbare, and he was named deputy to replace her."

Frostpaw wanted to ask Larchpaw what else she knew about Paledusk, but her attention was directed back to the Great Rock as there was movement from the leaders. Willowstar had strode forward, raising her tail for attention.

"Cats of the five Clans of the forest," Willowstar meowed in a loud voice. "Tonight is the night of the full-moon. So, let the gathering begin."

Quiet settled over the cats as they waited for their leaders to speak. Willowstar dipped her head courteously to the other leaders.

"Who would like to start?" she asked.

Morningstar was on his paws immediately, his grey-furred tail held high.

"New-leaf has brought bountiful prey to our territory, and ThunderClan is stronger than ever," he announced, with a pointed look at the other leaders, his gaze resting on Rabbitstar and Fennelstar specifically. "We've seen the births of two litters of kits in the past moon, and the making of a new warrior, Rockstorm."

The ThunderClan cats cheered, and there was some mutterings of congratulations for Rockstorm from cats from the other Clans. Frostpaw craned her neck to look at the grey tom for a moment. Autumnpaw leaned close to her.

"Remember how ThunderClan almost died during leaf-bare?" he whispered into her ear. "It sounds like Morningstar is eager to make them sound strong again."

"Yeah, their numbers are still low. They don't even have any apprentices now that Rockstorm's a warrior," Dewpaw added, nodding.

"Ha! Poor Rockstorm. He's left the apprentice's den, but he'll still be changing elders' nests and checking them for ticks!" Poolpaw snickered from behind them.

"That is all I have to report," Morningstar said.

Morningstar stepped back, casting the other leaders another suspicious glance as he did so. Willowstar strode forward, seemingly unbothered by his pointed look.

"The fish are swimming well in RiverClan," the pretty tabby purred in a silky voice. "And, I am pleased to announce that our medicine cat, Pebblestripe, has decided to take on an apprentice. RiverClan welcomes Hailpaw."

Frostpaw looked over to the medicine cats and was surprised to see that the medicine cats from all of the Clans were grouped closely together like old friends.

I guess they do spend a lot of time together during the half-moon.

Frostpaw assumed that the cat shyly ducking her head over there, a white she-cat with some grey tabby patches, was the new apprentice, Hailpaw. Cats cheered for Hailpaw like they did Rockstorm, but Frostpaw noticed the cheering for Hailpaw was louder, and more cats outside of RiverClan joined in, even some of her clan-mates.

Is that because she's training to be a medicine cat? Or, is RiverClan just more liked than ThunderClan?

"Hailpaw will make her first journey to Mothermouth at the next half-moon, where her apprenticeship shall be announced before StarClan," Willowstar finished after the cheering died down, and she returned to her seat, with a flick of her tail to indicate that she was done.

Fennelstar shot Sedgestar a questioning look, and Sedgestar courteously inclined his head towards the SkyClan leader, indicating for Fennelstar to go. Fennelstar rose to his paws, his spiky, bushy fur waving in the slight breeze.

"SkyClan is doing well. There is some two-leg activity on our borders; it appears like they are building more nests," he announced. "But, our prey are still running well. If anything, it's doing better than ever because the two-legs are scaring everything in our direction. So, thank you, two-legs."

There were some purrs of laughter from the cats in the crowd. Frostpaw glanced over and noticed everyone seemed amused besides the ThunderClan cats, who stared up at Fennelstar with stony gazes.

"That's funny. If prey is running so well, then why are your warriors hunting beyond your borders?" Morningstar said, rising to his paws to confront Fennelstar.

Fennelstar turned to look at the ThunderClan leader, blinking at him slowly.

"SkyClan cats are not thieves," Fennelstar meowed. "Have you actually seen any of my warriors in your territory?"

Morningstar shifted uneasily from paw to paw.

"No," he admitted. "But, we can scent you."

Fennelstar shrugged.

"Winds blow the scent-markers all over the place. That doesn't mean cats have been there," Fennelstar said.

The fur down Morningstar's back raised.

"You think I can't tell the difference between trespassing cats and windblown scent markers?!" he hissed, his voice vibrating with outrage.

Fennelstar didn't reply, but he did give an ear twitch which seemed to indicate that was the case. Morningstar gave another hiss, rounding on the SkyClan leader.

Sedgestar rose to his paws, wedging his way in between the two bristling cats.

"Watch your tempers," he said in a low rumbling voice. "It is a gathering after all."

Sedgestar turned to Fennelstar.

"Have you finished your report?" he asked.

Fennelstar dipped his head to indicate Sedgestar should go. Sedgestar turned to sweep his gaze over the crowd.

"ShadowClan is at the height of our strength," Sedgestar said.

His voice wasn't necessarily loud, but it was still strong, carrying all out through the clearing with a sort of effortless power. Frostpaw noticed her clan-mates were sitting up a bit straighter, their heads were held a bit more proudly, and their eyes shone with moonlight as they looked up at their leader.

"We've made four new apprentices this past moon," Sedgestar said, nodding towards Frostpaw and the others.

Frostpaw's pelt prickled a bit uncomfortably as the strange cats from the other Clans turned to stare at them. There were a few murmurs of congratulations, but no cheering. The mood had been soured by Morningstar's confrontation with SkyClan.

"And, we are expecting more kits to be born very soon, so our ranks will continue to swell." Sedgestar continued, but then his voice darkened. "But, speaking of trespassing cats..."

He paused for a moment, and everyone at the gathering watched him intently with bated breath, waiting for whatever came next. Sedgestar turned his head to look at Rabbitstar. The ginger tom met his gaze unflinchingly.

"Just today one of my warriors reported to me that Rabbitstar himself had crossed the border to attempt to attack one of our apprentices, who was simply hunting in our territory," Sedgestar said, his voice turning ice-cold as he stared at the WindClan leader. "I ask the WindClan leader to explain this blatant disrespect for our borders and senseless act of aggression towards ShadowClan, *and* to apologize for this indiscretion."

"You want *me* to apologize?!" Rabbitstar said in an incredulous tone.

"I don't 'want' it, I expect it," Sedgestar said, a hint of a snarl in his voice. "You have wronged ShadowClan, and if you want this good nature that's existed between our Clans for moons to continue, you *will* apologize."

Rabbitstar rose to his paws, baring his teeth at Sedgestar.

"I wouldn't have crossed the border if your apprentice hadn't insulted me. So, *I ask* the ShadowClan leader to teach their apprentices more respect towards Clan leaders," Rabbitstar spat.

Rabbitstar flicked his tail downwards to indicate Frostpaw in the crowd. Frostpaw froze, her muscles tensing up as everyone in the gathering's attention was focused on her.

"That is the apprentice that insulted me," Rabbitstar continued. "Look at her strange fur pattern. She must be the rogue kit that you adopted into your Clan moons ago, Sedgestar, isn't she? Maybe I'd be able to respect your Clan's borders if you didn't pollute it with such trash."

Frostpaw ducked down, her heart hammering. There were a few gasps at Rabbitstar's words from cats in the other Clans, and some jeering from WindClan. Frostpaw heard the sound of furious hissing from behind her. She cast a glance back and saw Redclaw was on her paws, looking like at any moment, she might launch herself up the Great Rock to attack Rabbitstar herself.

Sedgestar raised his tail commandingly for silence, but he didn't wait for it to fall before turning on Rabbitstar, looming over the smaller tom threateningly.

"Unlike your Clan, ShadowClan respects the Warrior Code. This is why we adopted an orphaned kit in need, and it is also what keeps us from traipsing all over and across the border like you do. But, you are right about one thing, Rabbitstar... I *don't* teach my cats to respect you. Because you are not *worthy* of my Clan's respect," Sedgestar rumbled. "You are so cowardly that you take out your insecurities on a young apprentice. *Pathetic.* I pity your warriors for having such a weak leader."

Shouts of outrage emerged from WindClan. Frostpaw was jostled as Autumnpaw rose to his feet beside her, turning towards the WindClan cats and bristling out his fur. Frostpaw looked around in shock. ShadowClan and WindClan were both rising to their paws, teeth and claws bared, fangs flashing. Sedgestar's amber eyes glinted threateningly in the moonlight, but he barreled on with his speech before Rabbitstar had a chance to respond, leaning in close to the ginger tom.

"But, so be it. If it's your desire for our Clans to be enemies, then it is done," Sedgestar growled. "I hope you sleep well at night, Rabbitstar. There is no need to keep watch. You won't see us coming either way."

Frostpaw blinked. Strangely, it seemed like the night was getting

darker, as if the leader of ShadowClan's words had somehow summoned the shadows themselves.

"ShadowClan, we're done here," Sedgestar said, bounding off the Great Rock and into the crowd of his clan-mates.

Frostpaw hastily rose to her feet, feeling her pelt jostled on every side as ShadowClan grouped tightly together around their leader, quickly pulling away from any cats of other clans in their midst. Moving as one, ShadowClan bounded out of the clearing, scaling the hills that surrounded the hollow. At the crest of the hill, Frostpaw cast a final glance over her shoulder. The four other Clans remained down in the clearing. She saw the dark silhouettes of the leaders on top of the Great Rock, and the deputies crouched at the foot of it. Her gaze lingered on the SkyClan deputy, Paledusk. His white coat seemed to glow in the dim light, almost acting as a beacon for her gaze. After a heartbeat, Frostpaw looked away and her eyes drifted upwards from him to the sky. A narrow cloud slashed across the full moon like a claw, casting the shadow of darkness over the forest.

With a final glance at the moon, Frostpaw turned, and ShadowClan vanished into the forest.

Preparations

ShadowClan buzzed with anticipation in the days following the gathering. Sedgestar had near constant patrols on the WindClan border so that every tree there strongly held the mark of ShadowClan. But, it seemed like WindClan wasn't going to take the blatant signs of ShadowClan aggression lying down, and they responded with increased border patrols of their own. But, besides a few minor scraps between the ShadowClan and WindClan border patrols, the threat of battle remained on the future's horizon, looming like a storm.

Grovepelt ordered that all of the apprentices get as much battle training as possible before the inevitable clash, and so for the seventh day in a row, Frostpaw found herself trailing after Swoopstrike, along with Pinepaw, Poolpaw, Autumnpaw, and their mentors, heading towards the Burnt Sycamore.

"I can't wait to tear WindClan to shreds!" Pinepaw growled, her black fur bushed out in excitement.

"Did you see how puny they looked at the gathering?" Poolpaw asked, swatting at the air in front of him like he was fighting an invisible WindClan warrior. "I've caught squirrels bigger than them!"

"They're going to regret ever messing with ShadowClan!" Autumnpaw declared, dashing ahead from the rest of the group to be the first to enter the clearing around the Burnt Sycamore.

Poolpaw and Pinepaw were hot on his paws, but Frostpaw followed her den-mates much more slowly, hanging back with the group of mentors.

She didn't understand why they were so excited. Her stomach clenched in anxiety as she thought of the coming battle. All she

could think about was her or one of her clan-mates getting hurt or killed, and she didn't see how that was something to be eager about. Frostpaw lingered at the edge of the clearing, watching the three siblings pounce about with each other.

"Not as excited as the other apprentices, huh?" Grovepelt asked Frostpaw, startling her slightly.

She blinked up at the deputy. The senior warrior looked down at her with a kind expression on his greyed, grizzled face, and Frostpaw felt a bit more at ease.

"No, I guess not," she meowed, looking back out at the tussling apprentices.

"Why?" Swoopstrike broke in with a harsh voice. "The duty of a warrior is to fight for their clan. You should be honored to battle for ShadowClan."

Frostpaw flinched, her ears flattening.

"I never said I wouldn't fight," she protested. "I—I'm just worried about anyone getting hurt."

Swoopstrike gave a derisive snort.

"Being nervous isn't a crime," Grovepelt said in a patient voice, giving Swoopstrike a pointed look.

The deputy turned to Frostpaw.

"I find, the older I get, the more worried I become before every battle. When I was a new apprentice, I was just like them." Grovepelt nodded towards the other apprentices. "Excited to fight. To prove myself. To stand up for my clan and family."

One of his ears twitched back slightly.

"In many ways, I'm still like that. I still will fight to protect my clan. But, that reckless sense of invulnerability I had as a young cat is gone."

A somber look crept across the deputy's face.

"I've seen too many friends and family pass on from this world to still feel that way," he said. "It becomes harder to sharpen your claws before battle when you can't help but wonder what friend won't be coming home afterwards."

Frostpaw gazed at Grovepelt's weathered face with a quiet sense of fear and wonder.

How many battles has he seen? How many friends has he lost? Did he once have a mate? Kits? Where are they now? ...What happened to them?

Grovepelt's gaze slid over to Frostpaw, and he looked at her out of the corner of his eyes.

"You are still a young cat," he meowed. "But, you have experienced much more tragedy in your life than you den-mates. That's why you understand that you are not invulnerable. And, knowing that is nothing to be ashamed of. Although it does make it harder to charge into battle... when you know fully well that you can die. So, you must be braver than them."

Grovepelt nodded towards Pinepaw, Poolpaw, and Autumnpaw.

"Because they don't understand," Grovepelt said in a quiet voice. "Or, at least, not yet."

Grovepelt strode forward without another word into the training clearing.

"Stop rolling around like kits," Grovepelt said loudly, interrupting the sibling's tussle. "Battles are not a game!"

Grovepelt turned towards Frostpaw, flicking his tail at her.

"Come here. We will be doing paired fights before practicing more specific battle techniques," he meowed. "We will start with Poolpaw and Frostpaw. And, Autumnpaw and Pinepaw."

Frostpaw slowly padded over to the rest of the group, taking her

place next to Poolpaw. Poolpaw squared himself up to her, fluffing out his black and white coat.

"Ready? Begin!"

The apprentices practiced fighting all morning. Frostpaw was pleased that she was able to hold her own against the larger Poolpaw, but she grew a bit more nervous when around mid-morning, they switched partners, and she was paired with Pinepaw.

StarClan, why couldn't I have gotten Autumnpaw instead...

The black she-cat narrowed her amber eyes at Frostpaw. Pinepaw was smaller than Poolpaw, making her and Frostpaw about the same size, although Frostpaw's longer coat gave an illusion of bulk. But, while Pinepaw didn't have size on Frostpaw, Frostpaw knew she did have a burning desire to beat her into the dust.

"I'm not going to go as easy on you as Poolpaw did, Dirtface," Pinepaw snarled in a soft voice so the mentors couldn't overhear.

Frostpaw narrowed her eyes at Pinepaw, but didn't reply.

"First apprentice to pin the other wins," Grovepelt announced to the group. "Remember, WindClan cats are small, but fast. They are most dangerous when they have the space to move around. In closer quarters though, we can easily overpower them. Keep these techniques in mind as you practice."

Frostpaw nodded. She shifted from paw to paw. Her muscles were already aching from all the wrestling with Poolpaw, but she knew she couldn't battle Pinepaw without putting up a good fight, or she'd never hear the end of it from the annoying furball.

"Begin!"

Pinepaw sprung at Frostpaw like a coiled snake. Rather than dodging her pounce, Frostpaw faced it and rolled with her as Pinepaw barreled into her chest, electing a squeak of surprise from Pinepaw at the unexpected lack of resistance.

"Come on, Frostpaw, put up a fight!" Swoopstrike snarled from the

sidelines as the two of them went tumbling.

"I said *not* to get yourself caught," Grovepelt's disapproving voice added.

Frostpaw ignored them as she and Pinepaw tumbled head over tail with the momentum from Pinepaw's spring. Frostpaw wrapped her paws around Pinepaw's shoulders, and as Frostpaw rolled back to the top of the tumble, she suddenly locked her muscles, digging her hindpaws into the soft, marshy ground. She jerkily halted the somersault and shoved her forepaws hard into Pinepaw's shoulders to pin the wiggling apprentice to the ground.

Frostpaw felt a surge of satisfaction in her chest as she stood over Pinepaw.

"...Frostpaw wins!" Grovepelt's pleasantly surprised voice said as Pinepaw violently jerked under Frostpaw's feet, ripping herself from Frostpaw's grasp.

Pinepaw scrambled back to her paws and sprung at Frostpaw with a snarl, her paws flashing with blows. Frostpaw ducked, her ears stinging as Pinepaw's paws swiped them.

"Stop that! Did you hear? Frostpaw won!" Swoopstrike snapped.

"It's alright, Swoopstrike," Frostpaw heard Grovepelt reply. "Let's see how this turns out."

Frostpaw set her jaw.

Fine. Pinepaw wants a rematch? I'll give her one.

Frostpaw sprung out of Pinepaw's reach, dodging back towards the Burnt Sycamore to give herself a moment to breathe, but Pinepaw was relentless, following Frostpaw. Frostpaw swiped at paw at Pinepaw's muzzle, but the she-cat dodged and retaliated with a sweeping lash of her forepaws, knocking Frostpaw's legs out from under her.

"Oomph!" Frostpaw's breath was knocked out of her as she hit the ground, but she quickly scrambled back to her paws.

Frostpaw saw Pinepaw crouching, preparing to leap on to her and pin her to the ground. Frostpaw's gaze quickly flashed as she looked around for an escape route. Her eyes settled on the old knobby branch several tail-lengths above her head. And, as Pinepaw leapt, so did Frostpaw. Frostpaw slightly startled herself with the height of her leap upwards as she easily sprung onto the branch of the tree, digging her claws into the old, burnt bark for purchase.

Pinepaw gaped up at Frostpaw, her brow furrowing.

"Hey! That's cheatin—ow!"

Pinepaw was cut off as Frostpaw dropped back down on her from the tree and the two of them went tumbling again. Frostpaw nipped at Pinepaw's paw as they rolled, while Pinepaw batted at her belly with her paws. Frostpaw squirmed, trying to escape Pinepaw's grasp, but the she-cat had twisted her paws deep into Frostpaw's long fur and dug in tight.

Frostpaw gasped as Pinepaw yanked on her fur, her skin stinging from the tug. With a final powerful surge, Frostpaw managed to yank herself free, although she left a few clumps of fur behind in Pinepaw's paws.

With an annoyed growl at her burning pelt, Frostpaw darted forward to swipe at Pinepaw's ears, but she ducked. Frostpaw quickly retaliated with another downward strike on Pinepaw's head, but the blow was grazing. Pinepaw snapped at Frostpaw's ankle as she pulled her paw back away.

Frostpaw's gaze slid around Pinepaw and her eyes narrowed as she noticed she and Pinepaw had switched positions, so now the other apprentice was closer to the Burnt Sycamore.

I can limit her attacks if I trap her against the roots.

Frostpaw flashed forward with a snarl, swiping a paw at Pinepaw's face. Pinepaw flinched backwards to dodge, and Frostpaw followed her, pressing her relentlessly to herd her towards the Burnt Sycamore. Pinepaw let out a quiet squeak of surprise when she went to take another step back and her hindquarters bumped the

twisted roots of the tree.

I've got her! Frostpaw thought, flashing forward again with another blow.

But, to her surprise, Pinepaw wasn't going to give in that easily, and the black-furred she-cat made a wild leap at Frostpaw, bowling her over. Frostpaw gasped in pain as Pinepaw kicked her stomach as they flailed and tumbled. But, it was Pinepaw who ended up on top this time, shoving Frostpaw to the ground with a growl.

"I win," Pinepaw snarled.

"That's enough," Grovepelt's voice rang out.

Pinepaw loosened her grip, and Frostpaw quickly shrugged Pinepaw off of her, pulling herself back to her paws. Frostpaw and Pinepaw stumbled away from each other, both panting. Frostpaw eyed her opponent, making sure that she wasn't going to spring at her again.

Grovepelt padded up to the two of them. He nodded approvingly at Frostpaw.

"Well done with that first round, Frostpaw, and with thinking about leaping onto the tree. A good surprise can often be the best attack. I expect one day you'll be expert at our shadow ambushes," Grovepelt meowed.

Frostpaw's chest puffed out in pride at the comment, her stinging pelt from her yanked fur fading from her mind.

"Although your strikes need some work. They are messy, like you're indecisive about where to hit. Strike with conviction, don't hesitate," Grovepelt added.

Frostpaw dipped her head to the deputy.

"Yes, Grovepelt," she meowed.

Grovepelt turned to Pinepaw.

"You have a lot of spirit, and you never give up, which is a brilliant

trait in a warrior," he said. "But, you need to learn to be more observant of both your surrounds and your enemy. Frostpaw used her environment to her advantage, and that is a vital component to winning a battle. And, as for observing your enemy, if you can gauge your enemy's attacks then you can guess what they will do next. Watch their eyes. Where their gazes go often betray their thoughts."

Pinepaw dipped her head.

"Yes, Grovepelt," she mumbled, tail-tip twitching.

"You've all done very well," Grovepelt said, raising his voice and turning towards Autumnpaw and Poolpaw, who had also stopped practice fighting to address them too. "We will head back to camp and take a break for now. See to it that Snakeeyes and Amberberry are fed, as well as the elders, then get some fresh-kill for yourselves. You all deserve it."

Swoopstrike approached Frostpaw as Grovepelt headed off in the direction of camp.

"We'll practice your strikes together this afternoon," Swoopstrike grumbled. "But... good job."

"Thank you," Frostpaw said, her tail curling up slightly.

Swoopstrike gave a curt nod and strode away after Grovepelt.

Autumnpaw bounded up to Pinepaw and Frostpaw, his amber eyes excited.

"Did you see me shove Poolpaw's muzzle into the ground?" Autumnpaw meowed, snickering. "I think he swallowed some mud!"

Pinepaw just huffed instead of replying, shoving past the two of them and striding off after Poolpaw and the mentors in the direction of camp. Frostpaw flinched as Pinepaw slapped her face with her tail as she walked by her.

"No, I missed it," Frostpaw said to Autumnpaw as the two of them padded off after them, making up the rear of the patrol.

But, Autumnpaw didn't seem to be listening to her. He was watching Pinepaw stride away from them with a furrowed brow.

"Hey, what's got your fur in a twist!" Autumnpaw meowed to her back.

Pinepaw shot them a scorching look from over her shoulder.

"That *rogue,"* Pinepaw hissed. "Embarrassed me in front of Grovepelt!"

Frostpaw's ears flattened.

"What are you talking about?" Frostpaw argued. "You won the last round!"

Pinepaw just snarled instead of replying.

"Yeah," Autumnpaw chimed in. "I heard him say that you both did good jobs! He complimented you!"

Pinepaw stopped walking, turning to hiss at the two of them, baring her fangs.

"How dare you defend her! You don't understand!" Pinepaw spat. "Grovepelt is the deputy *and* my mentor. I have to impress him! But, instead I let myself be beaten by *a rogue!* How is that not embarrassing?! What is he going to think of me now!"

"Stop calling her that," Autumnpaw snapped, the dark ginger fur down his back prickling in irritation.

"I'm not a rogue," Frostpaw growled quietly, breaking in. "I've lived in ShadowClan almost as long as you. And, I've been training exactly as long as you have! Why would you expect to be a better fighter than me?"

Pinepaw growled in response to her question.

"Just because you live here now, doesn't make you one of us," she spat.

Pinepaw whirled around and ran off into the forest.

It was close to sun-high by the time Autumnpaw and Frostpaw made it back to camp. The rest of their group had arrived a little before them, and Poolpaw trotted up to Autumnpaw and Frostpaw with two frogs in his jaws.

"Pinepaw and I have the elders if you two want to take the nursery," Poolpaw mumbled around the fresh-kill in his mouth. "It's probably for the best if we split up. I don't know what happened, but the way Pinepaw looks right now, she'll kill you both if she sees you."

"The nursery is fine with me," Autumnpaw meowed with a twitch of his tail.

Autumnpaw and Frostpaw headed to the fresh-kill pile. He grabbed a squirrel and Frostpaw picked up two mice before the two of them padded over to the thorn bush that sheltered the nursery. As they padded towards the entrance, they had to dodge back as Rowanheart brushed his way out, emerging suddenly from the den.

"Are those for the queens?" he asked.

Frostpaw and Autumnpaw nodded, mouths too full to speak.

"Great!" Rowanheart said, his eyes lighting up. "Snakeeyes just had our kits this morning! I bet she's starving! Let's go in! I'll show you them!"

Frostpaw's irritation towards Pinepaw faded some in the face of Rowanheart's clear joy about his new family. Frostpaw purred and followed Rowanheart into the den.

Rowanheart led the way towards Snakeeyes' nest. The white-furred queen was curled up, sleeping, but she stirred as her mate approached.

"Back so soon?" she murmured in a playful voice. "I thought you had patrols to be on. Or, is Sedgestar giving you the day off in honor of the birth of his grandkits?"

"I'm heading off soon," Rowanheart said with a purr, gently head-

butting his mate's side. "But, I ran into these apprentices with fresh-kill, and I wanted to show them our kits!"

Frostpaw padded up to Snakeeyes, dropping the mice she was caring at her paws. Snakeeyes' blue and green gaze flickered to Frostpaw.

"Hello, Frostpaw," she said with a friendly blink. "Thank you for the mice. Would you like to see the kits?"

"Yes," Frostpaw purred.

Snakeeyes moved her tail, revealing three tiny kits at her belly. Frostpaw purred happily at the sight of the cute, healthy kittens.

"This is Featherkit," Snakeeyes said, gently laying a paw on a fluffy tortoiseshell she-kit.

"That's Yewkit," Rowanheart said, leaning over to rasp his tongue over a silver striped tom.

"And, this is Lizardkit," Snakeeyes purred, touching her last kit, an all white tom.

"They are very cute!" Frostpaw purred.

"Maybe we can be their mentors when they become apprentices!" Autumnpaw said excitedly, padding over to Frostpaw to gaze down at the newborn kits after delivering the fresh-kill he brought to Amberberry.

"But, why would Sedgestar pick us?" Frostpaw asked. "When they are made apprentices, we'll have been warriors for less than a moon!"

Autumnpaw nudged Frostpaw's shoulder with his muzzle.

"Don't be such a downer!" Autumnpaw teased. "We can always hope!"

Frostpaw and Autumnpaw left the nursery after the fresh-kill had been delivered to the queens, although Rowanheart lingered

behind, evidently reluctant to leave his mate and kits and head out on that patrol.

As Frostpaw and Autumnpaw headed back towards the fresh-kill pile to grab some food for themselves, Frostpaw found her mind stuck on Snakeeyes, Rowanheart and their kits. Seeing the little family together, Frostpaw couldn't help but thinking about her own mother. And, the mystery of how Paledusk knew her.

I remember when I was a tiny kit, May was living on her own. While she was living like that, there's no reason to think that she didn't bump into clan cats like Paledusk from time to time.

But, Frostpaw remembered the way Paledusk looked at her. It wasn't just a look of surprise at seeing an old friend or acquaintance. He looked at her like he had just seen someone come back from the dead.

Frostpaw wasn't stupid, and knew there was another option. The reason that he was so shocked. She had never met her father, and had always assumed him to be another rogue... but just maybe...

Frostpaw shook her head.

But, if Paledusk is my father, then why am I in ShadowClan? Why wouldn't I be in SkyClan with him? May would've went to him when she needed help.

It didn't make any sense. In the faint memories Frostpaw had of when May talked about her father, her words were always fond. If May had been able to take Frostpaw to him, why wouldn't she?

Frostpaw's tail twitched anxiously.

Maybe he didn't know about me? Did May not tell him?

Frostpaw clenched her jaw.

Would May do that?

Frostpaw wanted to wail in frustration.

An image of May appeared in Frostpaw's mind.

It was true that Frostpaw hadn't known her mother long, but she always had loved her fiercely, and when they had been together, Frostpaw had felt like she could unequivocally rely on her. But, now Frostpaw felt betrayed. Her mother had died and left her here alone. And, not only that, she had left her with this mystery hanging over her head. What if Paledusk was her father? Frostpaw had enough problems trying to get her clan-mates to trust her without having to worry about them thinking she would betray them to Paledusk and SkyClan at a twitch of a whisker.

Frostpaw imagined confronting her mother.

"Why did you do this to me?" Frostpaw hissed in her mind at May.

The image of May in her head just gazed at Frostpaw with sad blue eyes.

"Are you alright?" Autumnpaw's meow cut through Frostpaw's thoughts.

They had reached the fresh-kill pile, and Frostpaw realized that she had been digging her claws into the marshy ground. Frostpaw shook her head, shaking off her thoughts like clinging cobwebs.

I have no reason to worry about Paledusk. There's no proof about anything. Getting myself worked up about it is just frog-brained.

"Yeah, sorry. Just thinking about WindClan," Frostpaw mumbled the lie.

She couldn't risk telling Autumnpaw her real thoughts. What if he found out that May and Paledusk knew each other, and then he became suspicious of Frostpaw? Autumnpaw was her only true friend in the Clan; Frostpaw couldn't lose him.

Autumnpaw blinked at her sympathetically.

"Don't worry. Once we're through with those rabbit-brains, they'll be so scared of ShadowClan that they won't ever bother you again," Autumnpaw said, giving a quiet growl.

Frostpaw nodded along with his words, although she wasn't sure that hostile WindClan was the biggest of her problems. Frostpaw chose a mouse to eat, and Autumnpaw picked a lizard for himself. They carried their food over to the edge of the camp and settled down to eat on one of the more grassy patches in the camp to keep their fur from getting too damp from the marshy ground. Frostpaw tried to keep her thoughts off of May and Paledusk as she ate, not wanting Autumnpaw to question her on her emotions again. She was soon properly distracted when Autumnpaw flicked his tail to draw her attention to Grovepelt and Sedgestar. The leader and deputy had just emerged from Sedgestar's den beneath the Oak Tree, and their heads were bent closely together in earnest conversation. Sedgestar finished the discussion with a firm nod to Grovepelt before turning and bounding up the side of Clanrock while Grovepelt settled at the base.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gathering beneath Clanrock for a Clan meeting!" Sedgestar yowled, settling down on the boulder.

Frostpaw's ears twitched up in interest, and she rose from her crouched position over her half-eaten mouse to gaze up at ShadowClan's leader. Frostpaw saw the moss covering the medicine cats' den at the base of Clanrock sway as Clearstream and Elmclaw pushed their way out of it, settling down in the clearing. The rest of their clan-mates followed, appearing out of dens or looking up from sharing tongues or prey. Rowanheart emerged from the nursery, taking a seat a few tail-lengths away from its entrance. Frostpaw spotted Pinepaw and Poolpaw appearing from the elders' den, followed by the elders themselves.

Frostpaw noticed that there were a few warriors missing from camp who must be out on patrol, but most of the cats were present. Sun-high was ShadowClan's least favorite time to be out of camp. It was when the day was the brightest and the hottest, so they preferred to nap, eat, and share-tongues at that time, saving their energy for late night patrols and hunts. But, Frostpaw figured with the increased patrolling on the WindClan border, Sedgestar had cats out even at sun-high.

Sedgestar's short fur ruffled in the cool breeze that blew through the

ShadowClan camp as he gazed down at his clan-mates from Clanrock.

"As you all know, WindClan grows more aggressive on our borders each passing day," Sedgestar said. "The time is approaching for our attack. We cannot wait much longer and potentially give them the chance to strike first."

ShadowClan yowled their agreement, some cats leaping to their paws in eagerness. Sedgestar waved his tail for silence.

"I've been in close discussion with Grovepelt, Clearstream, Elmclaw and some of our clan's senior warriors, and we've come up with a plan. We will wait for the next cloudy night, when there are no moon or stars to see by, and then we will strike," he said. "First, we will launch an attack on their camp. *But,* I want no WindClan nursing queens, kits, elders or medicine cats to be harmed, understood? Don't go into those dens. We are teaching WindClan a lesson about who is the stronger clan, not seeking to harm innocents."

There were nods and murmurs of agreement.

"We won't linger in their camp long. After we attack the camp and give them a good scuffle, I want to raid their fresh-kill pile. We'll grab as much food as we can carry and run back to our border. I expect WindClan will be incensed, and they will follow us there. But, that's where we will have a second patrol waiting, where we will ambush them again," Sedgestar finished.

"Who's going to be on the camp attacking patrol?" Thornheart called out, his tail held high in excitement.

"I will assign cats when the night comes," Sedgestar said, his amber eyes gleaming in the sun-light. "For the next few days, everyone keep up duties as normal, and make sure you are getting plenty of fresh-kill and rest. I want everyone in prime shape when the time is right."

The Ambush

"Today's the day I think," Autumnpaw said, his voice hushed but excited, and his amber gaze flickering up towards the overcast sky.

Frostpaw followed his gaze upwards towards the grey sky, wondering if Autumnpaw was right and the cloud cover would hold into the night, or if the battle would be put off again. It had been three sunrises since Sedgestar's announcement, and until now, the days and nights had been clear. But, today the sky had been dark with clouds since morning, with rain drizzling on and off. Now, as best Frostpaw could guess, it must be around sun-high, but the clouds still stretched from horizon to horizon, without a patch of blue to be seen.

"Maybe," Frostpaw murmured in response, her tail tip twitching nervously as she thought of the impending battle.

"I bet Sedgestar makes an announcement soon," Autumnpaw said, bending his head down to tear a chunk out of the lizard he was eating.

"So the cats chosen to fight can get ready," he continued, mumbling around the meat in his mouth.

Frostpaw looked down at the half-eaten startling at her paws, suddenly not feeling as hungry any more.

"Hey," Autumnpaw said, nudging her shoulder with his muzzle. "Stop looking so concerned! It'll be fine! First of all, we have way more cats than WindClan. Second: it's WindClan! They're small and weak and cowardly. The battle will be a breeze."

Frostpaw just nodded instead of replying, bending her head down, she forced herself to eat the rest of her meal.

"There is tale of a terrible disease," Greytail rasped, blinking her old watery eyes at Autumnpaw and Frostpaw, who listened raptly as they patted the clean moss, pine needles, and feathers that they brought into the elders' den into fresh nests. "That takes root in a cat's mind and drives them mad."

Autumnpaw and Frostpaw finished arranging the moss, but instead of leaving since their chore was finished, they settled down, watching Greytail intently as she began the story.

"Many, many moons ago, there was a ShadowClan warrior that, through a terrible accident, became faceless. That same accident that ruined his face also introduced the disease that ruined his mind," Greytail murmured, sweeping a gaze over the apprentices which was frighteningly intense. "The disease filled him with an unquenchable hunger and thirst, but when he'd try to drink, his throat would seize up. And, when he'd try to eat, his belly would refuse the meat. Before the accident, he was a quiet cat, mild-mannered, but afterwards he was filled with a terrible bloodlust. Thus began the most terrifying period of ShadowClan history. One of our own warriors, turned against his clan-mates, against all cats! He did unspeakable horrors to ShadowClan, and the rivers of blood that soaked the ground during those moons can still be felt to this day on cold leaf-bare nights. When you are hunting alone in the pines, you can feel it sticking to your paws... And, you can almost feel his cold, predatory gaze watching you—"

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath Clanrock for a Clan meeting!" Sedgestar's words rang out through the camp, echoing into the elder's den.

Frostpaw jumped in fright at the sudden sound of the leader's voice, torn from the elder's story and back into reality. Autumnpaw's head snapped up, and he gasped.

"It must be about the battle with WindClan!" he said, his eyes alight with excitement, springing to his paws.

"You two young-uns better get going then," Greytail said with a rough purr. "I'll finish the tale about the faceless cat another time."

"Thanks Greytail!" Autumnpaw said, waving his tail at her in goodbye as he left the den. "Frostpaw, come on!"

Frostpaw rose to her paws and with a quick nod to Greytail, she followed Autumnpaw outside. Autumnpaw and Frostpaw sat down a few tail-lengths away from the entrance to the elders' den, and Frostpaw leaned over towards Autumnpaw.

"You don't think that disease in the story Greytail was telling is real, right?" Frostpaw muttered to him.

"Don't worry," Autumnpaw assured, flicking his tail dismissively. "It's just an old legend. Now shh! The meeting is starting."

Frostpaw gazed up at Sedgestar as he waited for everyone to settle in before beginning his announcement.

Sedgestar cleared his throat.

"The cloud cover seems to be holding through the day," he began. "If it continues through the night, it will be perfect conditions for our battle. If it turns out that the clouds lift before sundown, I will reevaluate, but for now, we will continue on as if tonight is the night we fight."

There were excited shouts at Sedgestar's words, and he nodded his head with a pleased expression.

"I will now assign cats to the battle patrols. I will be leading the patrol which attacks the WindClan camp. With me, I will take Emberflower, Kestrelmoon, Fogfur, Marshnose, Thornheart, Damppaw, and Dewpaw."

"Darkpelt will lead the patrol that ambushes WindClan at the border. He will take Dustleap, Larkfoot, Weaseltail, Beeclaw, Swoopstrike, Pinepaw, Poolpaw, Autumnpaw, and Frostpaw."

Frostpaw's stomach flipped with nerves as Sedgestar said her name.

"Grovepelt will remain here and be in charge until I return. The rest of the warriors, Rowanheart, Redclaw, Hootflight, Dawntail, Dappledpelt, and Leafbreeze are to remain in camp as well. Guard

the kits and elders from possible WindClan retaliation. Although I anticipate that they will be too busy with us to make it here."

More eager shouts and snarls met Sedgestar's words. He waved his tail to silence them and carried on.

"Those named to be on the battle patrols be sure to rest and eat. We will leave camp just after sundown. This meeting is adjourned, but cats in my patrol, come see me to discuss our attack plans, and cats in Darkpelt's patrol, go see him."

Sedgestar bounded off of Clanrock to take a seat at its base, where the cats in his patrol padded over to meet him. Darkpelt headed over to the other side of camp, closer to the thorn tunnel. Autumnpaw and Frostpaw met up with Poolpaw and Pinepaw on their way over to Darkpelt.

"Why do we have to be on the ambush patrol?" Poolpaw complained, his tail drooping as they padded over to where their patrol was gathering. "I want to attack the WindClan camp with Fogfur and Dewpaw! Why were Damppaw and Dewpaw chosen but not us?"

"Because they have been training for like five moons more than we have, frog-brain!" Pinepaw snapped at Poolpaw. "And, Damppaw is a way better fighter than you anyway!"

Poolpaw's brow furrowed.

"Nuh-uh. Damppaw just *thinks* he's a brilliant fighter. But, I bet I could take him," Poolpaw sniffed.

"Stop your complaining," a voice snapped.

Poolpaw jumped as Swoopstrike appeared near the apprentices, evidently having overheard their conversation.

"You should just be happy that Sedgestar decided to pick you at all instead of leaving you at camp," Swoopstrike said, narrowing his eyes at Poolpaw. "So, keep your jaws shut."

"Yes, Swoopstrike," Poolpaw muttered.

With an irritable tail-twitch, the warrior stalked off, taking a seat next to Darkpelt. Darkpelt waited for everyone to gather close before he began.

"We will lay the ambush just beyond the tree-line, a little across the border, in WindClan territory," the broad shouldered warrior rumbled in a deep voice, wasting no time with small talk.

The black tom scored a single claw across the dirt in front of him. Frostpaw peered at the line in the dirt curiously.

"This is the border," Darkpelt explained, nodding at the line when he glanced over and noticed Frostpaw's furrowed brow.

"We will disguise our scents and then hide ourselves in the tall moor grass and wait for Sedgestar's patrol to lure WindClan over," Darkpelt continued. "Our patrol will be split into two flanks..."

Darkpelt looked around at the ground surrounding him and picked out two small pebbles from the dirt. Darkpelt placed the pebbles on one side on the line with a paw-length's distance between the two.

"These two pebbles are our two groups hidden on the WindClan side of the border. We will leave some distance between our groups," he explained. "Does anyone see a twig anywhere?"

Poolpaw found a stick next to him and tossed it to Darkpelt.

"Thanks," Darkpelt said, batting the twig to the opposite side of the line that the pebbles were on, positioning it so it was aligned with the gap between the two pebbles.

"Do you all know where the fallen tree is on the tree-line? That tree will be in the gap between where our two groups are located," Darkpelt said. "Sedgestar's patrol will come running over across the moor, and run straight for that fallen tree, going in between where our groups are hidden to get there. WindClan will be chasing them, so they will follow them to the fallen tree by running between our two patrols."

Darkpelt dragged a claw slowly across the ground, perpendicular to the first line he drew. He dragged his claw in between the two

pebbles, across the border line, and to the twig, where he stopped.

"But, once the last WindClan cat makes it through the passage between our patrols, I will yowl the signal to attack. At that point, Sedgestar's patrol will turn to fight WindClan. Our groups will then flank WindClan and attack them from both sides and from behind, cutting off their route of escape back into their own territory," Darkpelt said, shoving the pebbles towards the twig with his paw. "And with Sedgestar's patrol fighting from the front, the WindClan patrol will be completely encircled."

Darkpelt paused, looking up from the pebbles and lines he drew on the ground to scan the faces of the cats around him. Frostpaw's eyes were wide as she tried to visualize the layout of the battle that he was proposing.

I didn't realize battles involved so much planning...

"Any questions?" Darkpelt asked.

"Who will be in what group?" Weaseltail asked.

"Larkfoot, Beeclaw, Poolpaw, and Autumnpaw can be with me," Darkpelt meowed. "And, Weaseltail, Dustleap, Swoopstrike, Frostpaw and Pinepaw can be the other group."

Darkpelt turned to look at the group of apprentices.

"I know you four haven't been training long, but Sedgestar thinks this'll be a good opportunity for you all to get your first tastes of battle," Darkpelt said in his rumbling voice. "However, that doesn't mean that you need to take unnecessary risks. We have the numbers on WindClan, so there is no need for any of you to fight alone. Poolpaw and Autumnpaw are to stay close to each other. Beeclaw will be responsible for keeping an eye on you both. And, Frostpaw and Pinepaw will be paired and will be watched by Swoopstrike. Understood?"

Frostpaw and the other apprentices nodded. Frostpaw shot a look at Pinepaw out of the corner of her eye, her gaze uncertain. Would Pinepaw really have her back in the battle? Frostpaw wasn't sure

that Pinepaw would disobey direct orders from Darkpelt, and indirectly, Sedgestar himself, but the she-cat did seem to detest Frostpaw an awful lot. Pinepaw's expression was unreadable as she gazed up at Darkpelt, and Frostpaw looked away.

"Good," Darkpelt said. "That's all. Now rest and eat like Sedgestar said. We'll meet back here in the middle of camp at sundown."

As the group dispersed, Redclaw and Weaseltail padded up to the group of apprentices.

"Remember your training and look out for each other," Redclaw said, bending her head to nose Poolpaw's fluffy black and white side a little roughly.

"We will Redclaw," Poolpaw huffed, a bit of exasperation in his voice as he shied away from his mother.

"We've been training non-stop for days for this," Autumnpaw added.

"Yeah, we can beat WindClan. No problem," Pinepaw meowed, raising her chin.

Redclaw nodded.

"Good," she said a bit curtly. "Go on and eat then. Good luck to all of you."

Autumnpaw, Pinepaw, and Poolpaw headed off for the fresh-kill pile, chattering together excitedly about the battle, but Frostpaw lingered near Redclaw and Weaseltail. Frostpaw saw that Redclaw was watching her kits walk away from her with a slightly pained gaze. Frostpaw studied her eyes. She got the sense that deep down Redclaw wished that they hadn't been chosen to fight, but she wouldn't admit it out loud.

Because Redclaw must know that she can't stop her kits from growing up and facing the dangers of the world.

Frostpaw's tail drooped slightly, her thoughts turning to May.

May wasn't even around long enough to have this conflict with me.

Frostpaw hesitantly padded over to Redclaw's side. Redclaw's ears pricked in surprise as Frostpaw gave a soft, comforting purr and rubbed the length of her body along the warrior's.

"Everything will be okay, Redclaw," Frostpaw meowed in a quiet voice.

Redclaw blinked big green eyes that welled with sudden emotion at Frostpaw.

"Thank you, Frostpaw. You always were my sweet one," Redclaw murmured, gently touching her nose to Frostpaw's ear. "You should go eat too though. I'll be fine."

Frostpaw nodded and padded off to join the others. As she walked away, she heard Weaseltail murmur to Redclaw from behind her.

"I'll watch out for them," he said.

"I know you will," Redclaw whispered in reply, giving a small sigh.

The rest of the day passed in a blur for Frostpaw. It was one of the least eventful that she'd had since she began training. After Sedgestar's announcement she ate, then she slept.

She hadn't thought she'd be able to rest when she first curled up in her nest, with the incoming battle looming over her, but, strangely, Frostpaw didn't feel the whole stress of it yet. She figured that the reality of the situation must not have fully set in. And, so as soon as her eyes shut, sleep rolled over her like a dark wave.

When she awoke, it was nearing sundown. Frostpaw silently groomed herself in her nest; she and Dewpaw, who was still sleeping, were the only apprentices left in the den. After Frostpaw's pelt had been flattened to her liking, she padded out of the apprentices' den, and headed to a puddle at the edge of the camp to lap up some water that had collected from the rainfall today. It wasn't raining now, but the sky was still cloudy as it was earlier, albeit darker, since the sun must now be sinking towards the horizon.

Frostpaw raised her head, licking the last of the cool water droplets

from her lips. An unusual amount of cats were milling around camp for the time of day. The cats chosen by Sedgestar to stay in camp had returned from the patrols they had gone on earlier, and the cats chosen to battle hadn't yet left. The mood was quiet and subdued; Frostpaw saw cats only spoke to each other in hushed tones. Gazes and expressions were serious. Frostpaw's ears pricked as she noticed Elmclaw padding over to her, carrying some herbs in his mouth. He dropped a few leaves on the ground in front of Frostpaw.

"Eat. They will give you strength and keep you from getting tired," the medicine cat muttered around the leaves still clutched in his jaws.

"Thank you," Frostpaw murmured, obediently bending her head to lap up the bitter tasting leaves.

When Frostpaw raised her head back up, Elmclaw had already moved on to give herbs to the next cat.

It wasn't long until Sedgestar emerged from his den with Clearstream. Sedgestar departed from the medicine cat with a head dip, striding into the center of camp, where he paused. Conversations stopped as cats crowded around him, eyes alert and ears pricked.

"Ready?" Sedgestar meowed, his gaze sliding across his clan-mates.

Firm nods greeted his answer, tails raising. Frostpaw's stomach flipped with nerves as she sought the cats in her patrol out in the crowd, moving to stand next to Weaseltail and Autumnpaw. Autumnpaw gave her an enthusiastic bump in the shoulder, his amber eyes gleaming.

The patrols started to form out from the crowd. Frostpaw's group clustered around Darkpelt, and Sedgestar's patrol gathered near him. Frostpaw spotted Dewpaw in Sedgestar's patrol, quickly choking down herbs after being roused from her long nap. The cats that were remaining in camp hung further back. Frostpaw saw Redclaw there, watching her mate and kits with a carefully unreadable expression.

Grovepelt padded through the crowd over to Sedgestar. Sedgestar gave him a confident nod as the deputy approached him.

"Protect the camp, Grovepelt," Sedgestar meowed.

"Of course I will," Grovepelt replied in a quiet voice.

Grovepelt padded up to the leader's side, resting his thin pale brown tail on Sedgestar's shoulders.

"And, you stay safe, Sedgestar," Grovepelt murmured.

Sedgestar blinked his amber eyes affectionately at his former mentor.

"Don't worry about me, old friend," Sedgestar said with a quiet rumbling purr. "I have many lives left. You won't have to take my place just yet."

Sedgestar looked away from Grovepelt, sweeping his powerful gaze over all of the cats in camp. He raised his chin to address his clan.

"ShadowClan! To me!" Sedgestar shouted, waving his long brown-striped tail before turning and charging out of camp through the thorn tunnel.

The cats that were to remain to guard the camp as well as the queens and elders raised their voices in a supportive cry, cheering the cats chosen to battle on as the patrols streamed out of the camp in a single file line through the tunnel.

Before it was Frostpaw's turn to run through the tunnel, she cast a final glance back at the camp. Everyone was still cheering, their heads tilted back in the yowling cry. Everyone except for Grovepelt, who still stood in the center of camp. He watched his departing clan-mates with his chin held high in a proud expression, but his old, deep-green eyes were tinged with sadness.

Grovepelt's words echoed in Frostpaw's ears.

"It becomes harder to sharpen your claws before battle when you can't help but wonder what friend won't be coming home afterwards."

Frostpaw shivered slightly, but she still turned and ran out of camp.

ShadowClan crept through the dark pines. The forest had quickly turned pitch black as the last of the sunlight which had spent the day fighting the clouds finally surrendered as it became night. Sedgestar's and Darkpelt's patrols traveled together for a little while. Sedgestar led his clan to some toadstool patches that every cat took turns rolling in to disguise their ShadowClan scents.

"WindClan will be very surprised when they realize that they're being hunted by a bunch of mushrooms," Sedgestar said, and the patrols purred with amusement.

Soon enough though, it became time for the two patrols to part. Sedgestar's patrol was heading to the tunnel to enter into the heart of WindClan territory undetected, but Darkpelt's patrol had to finish the journey through the forest to the fallen tree at the WindClan border.

"Keep your eyes bright and your claws sharp," Sedgestar meowed to Darkpelt's patrol.

Although Sedgestar was only a few tail-lengths away from Frostpaw, most of his shape was lost in the deep shadows under the pines; Frostpaw could only make out the slight glint of his reflective eyes.

"I will see you all very soon."

Sedgestar turned and led his patrol away, the cats quickly vanishing into the darkness.

The rest of the journey to the moor was completed in silence. Frostpaw padded close to Autumnpaw, comforted by the occasional brush of his flank.

After a little while longer of walking, the trees started to thin, and soon Frostpaw could see the moor grass waving gently in the warm night's breeze between the trunks of the pines. She could also see the fallen pine at the edge of the moor, the location that their ambush plan rested on.

Darkpelt led the group to the fallen pine, where he paused under the cover of the trees. He split their patrol with a flick of his tail. Autumnpaw gave Frostpaw a small nod before heading over to join Darkpelt's group, while Frostpaw went over to Swoopstrike and Pinepaw and her group. Darkpelt gestured with his tail towards the moor indicate for them to take their positions hidden out in the grass. Darkpelt led his group to take up position on the right of the fallen tree, leaving the group Frostpaw was in to take the left. Frostpaw crept out into the moor grass hesitantly, sucking in a quiet, hissing breath as her paws crossed the strong scent markers at the edge of the moor and entered into WindClan territory. Weaseltail led their group into the correct position in the grass, leaving the required amount of space between their group and Darkpelt's. Darkpelt's very shadowed form nodded at them from a few boulder-lengths away, approving their positioning before lowering his tail to gesture them to get down. Frostpaw and everyone else crouched down in the tall moor grass, and the ShadowClan patrol disappeared from sight.

Tension thrummed through Frostpaw's body as she waited, her form easily hidden by the tall, dense strands of grass. The night was totally still and silent around her. The dark clouds swirled soundlessly above, and every so often, only the echoing cry of a hooting owl would break the stillness that hung over the night. Frostpaw could almost imagine that she was the only cat on earth, lost in a sea of moor grass, which stretched as far as she could see in the darkness in every direction around her. But, Frostpaw knew that many other cats were hidden in the grass with her close by, some might be as close as a tail-length away, although she had no way of telling. Just as Sedgestar wanted, the cloud cover meant it was very hard to see through the grass with such little light, and the toadstools that the ShadowClan patrol had rolled in was doing a great job at disguising their cat-scents.

Now all that was left to do was wait for their carefully planned trap to be sprung.

The sound of faint, furious yowling echoing across the hills was the first sign of the approaching patrol. The yowls grew increasingly louder, and they were soon joined by the sound of pounding

footsteps. But, from Frostpaw's hidden crouch, she still could not see any of her clan-mates through the thick blanket of moor grass that surrounded her. It wasn't until the retreating ShadowClan patrol was only a few tail lengths away that she could make out the dark forms of cats streaming through the tall grass. Sedgestar's patrol ran through where Darkpelt's patrols were hiding, with WindClan prey clutched in their jaws, spiriting towards the fallen tree at the tree-line, just as planned. Sedgestar himself was the last cat in the ShadowClan patrol. Frostpaw could just barely make out his deeply shadowed head, shoulders and back peeking out from above the tall grass as he ran. A WindClan hare hung from his jaws, and he twisted his head over his shoulder to shout behind him without slowing his stride.

"And you call yourselves the fastest cats in the forest?!" Sedgestar's taunting voice rang out, yowled from around the prey in his mouth.

Frostpaw's muscles tensed. She felt a deep, instinctual urge to move to attack at the sound of her leader's voice, but she forced herself to remain motionless.

We're waiting for Darkpelt's signal, remember? she reminded herself.

A furious snarl met the sound of Sedgestar's taunt.

"Don't let those fox-hearts get away!" Rabbitstar's voice yowled.

More shadowed shapes flashed past Frostpaw, and a wave of WindClan scent rolled over her, but the enemy cats took no notice of the ShadowClan patrol hidden right under their noses as they charged for the tree-line.

As the WindClan warriors ran past, Frostpaw thought her heart was going to hammer out of her chest as she leaned forward, feeling every muscle in her body tensing. She was a branch straining under the pressure of a storm, just waiting on that final gust to snap...

"NOW!" Darkpelt's voice thundered.

Frostpaw threw herself forward.

The hidden ShadowClan patrol exploded out into the night,

charging at the back of the WindClan patrol with an eerie chorus of howling battlecries. Frostpaw panted as she ran as fast as she could. The moor grass painfully whipped her face, making her eyes water and sting, but her gaze was fixedly locked on the back of the nearest WindClan cat.

For a heartbeat, the confusion of the WindClan cats was palpable, like a dense fog had descended over them. The WindClanners came to a jerky, stumbling halt as the patrol they were chasing suddenly threw down their prey and whirled on them. But, also their ears pricked and heads swiveled backwards in shock at the sound of Darkpelt's patrol from behind—approaching them from *their own* territory. Frostpaw saw Weaseltail reach a WindClan cat and throw himself at the enemy warrior; the two of them going tumbling in a screeching ball of fur. The noise seemed to jar WindClan back to life.

"WindClan attack!" Rabbitstar screeched.

The night devolved into shrieks and chaos as WindClan met the waves of ShadowClan descending on them from all sides at the edge of the moor. Swoopstrike reached the WindClan warrior Frostpaw was charging at before she did, swiping at the WindClan she-cat's face. The WindClan cat dodged back, dodging his blows, hissing at Swoopstrike. The she-cat's gaze darted from side to side, but with ShadowClan all around, the WindClan patrol was trapped, grouped tightly together, and there was no where for her to flee.

We cut off WindClan's room to run! Just like Grovepelt said in training! Frostpaw thought as she closed the distance between her and Swoopstrike with a few more bounds.

Swoopstrike didn't look at her, but she noticed his ears flickered towards the left. Frostpaw immediately understood the command, and she feinted left, swiping at the WindClan she-cat's side. The grey WindClan warrior was too quick though, and she dodged away, leaving Frostpaw's claws to only slice through air. But, Swoopstrike had already moved to the right side, and the grey she-cat practically bumped into him. Swoopstrike gave her a rough cuffing around her ears and grappled with her short pelt to try to pull her to him as she tried to struggle away. Seeing the enemy

warrior occupied with Swoopstrike, Frostpaw seized the opportunity to pounce at her, clamping her jaws around her tail to give a sharp bite. The she-cat spat, lashing out with her hind-legs, one of them kicking Frostpaw in the face, dislodging her.

Frostpaw hissed in pain. She had been scratched across her forehead, and she blinked hard as a few drops of blood ran down her fur and into her eye. But, as Frostpaw swiped her blood from her gaze, she noticed the grey warrior looked much worse for wear than she did. She had been distracted by Frostpaw's bite, and Swoopstrike had used that distraction to get his claws properly into her. And, now he held the smaller cat mercilessly in place as he tore paw-ful after paw-ful of fur from her sides, leaving her pelt a torn, bleeding mess. It wasn't until she wailed in surrender did Swoopstrike release her, and she went fleeing into the surging crowd of the battle, her form quickly getting lost in the darkness, the tall grass, and the confusing, writhing masses of battling cats.

Swoopstrike bounded up to Frostpaw, his eyes practically glowing with excitement and blood-lust. His sides were also covered in scratches that the WindClan warrior inflicted as she tried to escape his clutches, but Swoopstrike didn't seem to even notice them. Swoopstrike stopped in front of Frostpaw, reaching a WindClan-bloodstained paw towards Frostpaw's face. He used it to tilt her chin up, inspecting the cut across her forehead.

"The blood's already clotting. You'll live; it's shallow," he said, dropping his paw from her chin. "Now you should go find Pinepaw, and help her out. I'll be a yowl away if you need me."

Frostpaw nodded, and Swoopstrike was gone, throwing himself back into the fray. Frostpaw scanned the area around her, searching for Pinepaw's black pelt. She saw her a few fox-lengths away, facing off against a snarling grey WindClan tom. Pinepaw let out a high pitched screech as the enemy warrior clamped his jaws down on her tail. She was struggling futilely to free herself, and a golden-brown WindClan cat was rounding on the pinned apprentice, unsheathed claws raised. With a growl, Frostpaw went bounding over to Pinepaw, springing onto the grey tom's back, digging her fore-claws into his shoulders and her hind claws into his spine, and giving his ear a hard bite.

As the salty tang of blood filled Frostpaw's mouth, the grey tom yowled in pain, releasing Pinepaw's tail from his jaws. Pinepaw shot forward, falling on the golden-brown tom in a flurry of hisses and slashes. The grey tom under Frostpaw bucked, twisting and snarling as he tried to shake her off. Frostpaw gasped as she lost her grip and was thrown to the ground. She landed on her side, letting out a yowl of pain as her hip slammed against the hard-packed earth. The grey tom whirled on her, but Swoopstrike suddenly appeared, barreling the smaller WindClan cat over. Frostpaw scrambled back to her paws and watched her mentor pin the smaller cat to the ground, give the WindClan warrior's side a solid raking with his claws before releasing him and sending the bleeding tom fleeing away with a final parting swat.

Frostpaw turned to check back on Pinepaw, and saw her still locked in battle with the golden-brown tom. Frostpaw ducked down, stalking up to the golden-brown warrior from behind, her form mostly hidden in the grass. Pinepaw's gaze flickered to her for just a heartbeat as she spotted her in the grass, but then the black she-cat quickly looked away, not wanting to give away Frostpaw's position. Frostpaw watched as Pinepaw looked deliberately down at the tom's paws. The tom danced away from Pinepaw, thinking she was going for his feet, but Frostpaw understood the silent request. Frostpaw shot forward, sweeping the tom's legs out from him with a powerful wack of her forepaws. The tom let out a yelp of surprise as he stumbled, trying to turn towards Frostpaw's attack, but before he could, Pinepaw had sprung onto his back and was raking her hindlegs down his spine with several kicks, clawing up golden-brown fur and blood.

The tom howled in pain, trying to shake her off, but Frostpaw darted forward, raking her claws down the tom's face, clawing his muzzle. The tom snapped blindly, and Frostpaw hissed in pain as his fangs scraped her paw. Pinepaw sprung off the tom's back and landed next to Frostpaw before she whirled back towards the WindClan cat. Pinepaw and Frostpaw advanced towards him side by side, hissing, tails lashing and fur bristling. The tom shied back a few tail-lengths, looking uncertain if he wanted to take on both apprentices again.

A loud yowl interrupted the fighting, ringing across the battlefield. Frostpaw, Pinepaw and the WindClan cat all turned to look towards the noise. A few boulder-lengths away from them, Sedgestar was standing over a ginger-furred cat in a patch of moor grass that had been violently flattened to the ground from the struggling cats. Sedgestar's striped head and tail raised high. Frostpaw blinked as she recognized the ginger cat that Sedgestar had pinned to the ground as Rabbitstar.

"This is where the border is, Rabbitstar!" Sedgestar snarled, shoving the ginger tom's muzzle into the dirt with a large paw. "And, don't you forget it!"

Sedgestar sprung off of Rabbitstar, and the WindClan leader stumbled to his paws, spitting dirt from his mouth. The ginger tom whirled, snarling at Sedgestar, seeming like he was going to attack him again, but Sedgestar just gave a low, rumbling, warning growl, his tail slowly swishing behind him. Rabbitstar's gaze flicked around. Frostpaw saw that the ShadowClan warriors were creeping closer, tightening the snare around the WindClan cats, pushing them more tightly together. It was clear that WindClan was trapped and sorely outnumbered, and Rabbitstar seemed to realize that.

Rabbitstar gave a low, furious growl.

"WindClan! Retreat!" he yowled.

The ginger leader turned and shoved himself between the still snarling and swatting Darkpelt and Dustleap, breaking free from the circle of ShadowClan cats to flee across the moor. The trapped WindClan cats attempted to follow, shoving up against the circle of ShadowClan warriors.

"Let them run, but make sure they remember the sting of our claws!" Sedgestar shouted, throwing his head back to let out a thundering caterwaul of victory.

The rest of ShadowClan followed suit, raising their voices in exhilaration. WindClan fled with ShadowClan letting them pass by, but being sure to send them off with parting swipes and snaps. Frostpaw watched as Pinepaw sprung at the golden-brown cat they

had been battling, giving one of his hindlegs a nip as he turned and ran, following the rest of WindClan. Soon all of the WindClan cats were streaking away from the ShadowClan patrol, sprinting through the tall grass.

Frostpaw's heart pounded. The feeling from the ShadowClan cry was infectious, and Frostpaw couldn't stop herself from throwing her head back and adding her voice to theirs. ShadowClan's chorus of triumphant yowls echoed across the moor; their victory shouted up towards the dark night sky.

To ShadowClan

Frostpaw's throat growing hoarse, she finally ceased her yowling. Slowly the rest of her clan-mates did the same, and silence once again settled over the night. Frostpaw's gaze flickered over to meet Pinepaw's, who was still standing at Frostpaw's side. Pinepaw gave Frostpaw a single nod, and for once, her amber gaze held no trace of contempt.

"Well done," Swoopstrike meowed to Frostpaw in his gruff voice, padding over to the two apprentices.

Frostpaw raised her chin, feeling a rush of pride. Swoopstrike turned to Pinepaw.

"And, I'm sure Grovepelt will be pleased with you when I tell him how well you fought once we get back to camp," Swoopstrike added.

Pinepaw's tail curled up in delight, her amber eyes glowing.

"Pinepaw! Frostpaw!"

Frostpaw's ears pricked, and she turned to see Autumnpaw and Poolpaw running over to her and Pinepaw. Besides a few scratches, Frostpaw was relieved to see that neither apprentice looked any worse for wear. The two toms' eyes were still alight with excitement from the rush of the battle, and they practically vibrated with energy.

"We sure showed them!" Poolpaw crowed, springing around and swatting at nearby strands of grass.

For once, Swoopstrike didn't scold Poolpaw for pouncing around like a kit, but he did give an eye roll, shaking his head.

"It felt so good to finally use all of those moves we've been practicing in a real battle!" Autumnpaw said, bouncing up and

down on his toes, before turning to Frostpaw and Pinepaw. "And, I saw you two fighting together there towards the end! You made a good team!"

Frostpaw glanced over at Pinepaw, but the other apprentice didn't look at her, just loudly cleared her throat.

"...Frostpaw was surprisingly competent," Pinepaw sniffed.

"Careful, Pinepaw, that almost sounded like a compliment," Poolpaw purred in a cheeky voice, his black and white tail flicking.

Pinepaw curled her lip up at her brother, a warning growl rumbling in her throat.

"How are my apprentices over here?" A deep voice behind Frostpaw said, interrupting the apprentices' bickering. "No serious injuries I hope?"

Frostpaw turned to see Sedgestar, accompanied by Weaseltail, padding over to the group of apprentices. Weaseltail swept a worried gaze over the apprentices, scanning them all separately, but the tom seemed to relax as he saw everyone still had two eyes, two ears, four legs and a tail. The ShadowClan leader was missing a few patches of fur on his shoulder and had a cut down his side, but his amber eyes glowed with victory. Swoopstrike shook his head in response to Sedgestar's question.

"No injuries here beyond scrapes and bruises, Sedgestar," Swoopstrike meowed. "And, the apprentices all fought valiantly."

"Good," Sedgestar said, a content look entering his amber eyes.

Weaseltail nodded in agreement, his face taking on a proud fatherly expression.

Autumnpaw practically swelled with pride. Pinepaw and Poolpaw exchanged delighted looks. Even Frostpaw felt a jolt of happiness at the compliment from ShadowClan's leader.

"How did Damppaw and Dewpaw do with the attack on the camp?" Swoopstrike asked.

Sedgestar's whiskers twitched with pleasure.

"Excellent," he meowed. "It seems to me that they are more than worthy of their warrior names. I will hold their ceremony once we get back to camp."

"Darkpelt and Larkfoot will be pleased," Weaseltail purred.

Pinepaw gasped, her fur standing on end with excitement.

"I have to go congratulate Damppaw!" she said.

Pinepaw quickly bounded off. Sedgestar departed from the group as well, raising his voice to address all of the ShadowClan cats.

"Remark the borders, then head back to camp! Don't forget to take the prey that was stolen from WindClan back too. Tonight we celebrate our victory!" Sedgestar said.

ShadowClan yowled in excitement. As many warriors went to mark the border on the trees, Fogfur and Beeclaw made their way over to their apprentices. Fogfur was carrying a massive hare, evidently one stolen from the WindClan fresh-kill pile.

"Let's head back to camp," Fogfur mumbled around the fresh-kill in his mouth. "It looks like plenty of warriors have the border marking taken care of."

Swoopstrike nodded in agreement.

Weaseltail, Beeclaw, Fogfur, Swoopstrike and the three apprentices walked through the trees in the direction of camp. As the excitement from the battle faded, Frostpaw found herself fighting back yawns as exhaustion crept in. But, she knew she wouldn't be sleeping for a while. Considering the warriors ceremony planned and the rowdy state the rest of the clan was in, ShadowClan would be living up to its name and wouldn't be resting until the shadows were driven away by the dawn.

Their group was the first to reach camp, and as they headed towards the thorn tunnel, the camp guard's voice rang out through the forest

"Returning ShadowClan warriors!" Hootflight called.

As Frostpaw emerged, blinking from the thorn tunnel, and she and her group were mobbed by the cats that had remained in camp.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Did we win?"

"Where's Sedgestar?"

"WindClan was soundly defeated," Fogfur boasted in a loud voice, dropping his hare at his feet. "The rest of the patrols should be right behind us!"

ShadowClan broke out into cheers.

Redclaw padded up to Weaseltail and the group of apprentices.

"Where's Pinepaw?" she meowed, her green eyes slightly concerned. "She's not injured, is she?"

"No, she's fine," Autumnpaw meowed.

"She just *had to* be the first to congratulate *Damppaw*," Poolpaw said with an eye-roll, mockingly huffing out Damppaw's name in the same breathy voice Pinepaw used. "Sedgestar is making him and Dewpaw warriors tonight."

"Damppaw, huh?" Redclaw said with an amused twitch of her whiskers, exchanging a glance with Weaseltail. "She's been padding after that tom since she was a kit!"

"We know," Autumnpaw said, sticking his tongue out and wrinkling his face up like he just smelt crow-food.

Frostpaw stifled a loud purr at his expression, trying to cover it with a cough. But, the noise didn't fool Autumnpaw, and he shot her a look out of the corner of his gaze, his amber eyes shimmering playfully.

"Stop teasing your sister," Redclaw said sternly, flicking her tail at

Autumnpaw's ears, but her gaze didn't look serious.

"Yes Redclaw," Autumnpaw said dutifully, ducking his head to dodge her tail, but his gaze continued to spark with mischief.

"Come here, Frostpaw, let me clean that blood off of your forehead," Redclaw said, rising to her paws and padding over to her before Frostpaw could even respond.

Frostpaw obediently dipped her head to allow Redclaw to rasp her tongue over her forehead, washing the blood off and gently rasping over the cut. Frostpaw noticed with a jolt that she was just as tall as her now. Redclaw wasn't a particularly large cat, to be fair, but Frostpaw was still surprised that Redclaw had to stretch up to her full height to reach Frostpaw's forehead.

"There," Redclaw purred once she finished, giving Frostpaw another lick on the cheek for good measure. "You're back to being as pretty as ever."

"Thank you, Redclaw," Frostpaw purred quietly.

Redclaw's ears pricked, and she turned towards the thorn tunnel.

"I hear more cats coming!" she meowed.

Redclaw was right, and the rest of the ShadowClan patrols appeared, streaming through the tunnel with WindClan prey dangling from many of their jaws. Frostpaw spotted Pinepaw and Damppaw among them. Damppaw had a large WindClan pheasant in his mouth and a newly torn ear, but besides that looked no worse for wear. Pinepaw trailed after him, meowing something to him that Frostpaw could not hear because the camp had broken out into cheers again at the appearance of the rest of the battle patrol. Sedgestar was the last to enter camp, and he bounded victoriously into the center of the clearing, amidst his cheering clan-mates.

"My friends!" Sedgestar yowled, his shadowed figure stretched up proudly, and the cheering quieted so the cats could hear their leader. "As foolish as it may be, there are times when the other Clans start to think that they are stronger than us..."

A chorus of angry growls met his words, and Sedgestar waved his tail for silence.

"I know. I know," he said. "At gatherings, we carry ourselves with a quiet pride and dignity, reassured that we can face any threat that dares challenge us. But, sometimes the other clans see that and instead of seeing our strength, they think we are weak because we don't grumble and growl and puff our chests out and strut about like cardinals, as they do."

More angry yowls challenged his words, and Sedgestar nodded along with them.

"BUT!" he yowled out over all the other voices. "That false strength they display is just a mask to hide their insecurities and weaknesses! But, we are confident, so we are quiet! We know the value of our hidden strength! *Of shadows!"*

Frostpaw joined her voice to the others, yowling out her agreement. Her heart pounded in excitement. Frostpaw felt a strange feeling of collectiveness settle over her. It didn't seem anymore like her voice was shouting along with the others, but instead they blended together so now there was only one cry, one voice— ShadowClan's.

"WindClan was reminded of this tonight!" Sedgestar shouted, his amber eyes burning with fire. "It is a lesson they won't soon forget! And, so now we feast on their prey and celebrate our victory! To ShadowClan!"

"To ShadowClan!" the clan roared the echoed cry.

The prey taken from WindClan was distributed out among the cheering clan, and Grovepelt padded over to their fresh-kill pile to supplement it with a few pieces of ShadowClan prey so that every cat would have a full belly.

"Here you go," Fogfur said with a deep purr, dropping the massive hare he had stolen at Poolpaw, Autumnpaw and Frostpaw's feet. "This should be big enough to feed all three of you."

"Thank you Fogfur!" Poolpaw gasped excitedly.

Poolpaw quickly tucked in, inhaling the rabbit so quickly that it made Frostpaw wonder whether he thought that if he didn't eat it fast it would still run away from him.

"We better get in to have a piece before Poolpaw eats it all!" Autumnpaw meowed to Frostpaw with a purr.

He head-butted Poolpaw's black-and-white flank.

"Move your fat tail over and save some for us!" Autumnpaw purred.

"I'm not fat! I'm just fluffy!" Poolpaw protested through a mouthful of food, but he still scooted to make space for Autumnpaw and Frostpaw around the piece of prey.

Autumnpaw didn't reply, but he took a big bite of the rabbit, and the brothers' argument was forgotten for the moment as they both ate. Frostpaw took a bite from the flank of the rabbit, and let out a contented purr at the taste of the juicy meat.

"It's good, isn't it?" Autumnpaw mumbled around the food in his mouth. "And, it tastes even better than normal because we weren't the ones who had to catch it!"

The clan ate for a while, sharing prey and purrs and tongues while Elmclaw and Clearstream made their way through the group, putting herbs and cobwebs on wounds. Clearstream headed over to the group of apprentices, examining the cut across Frostpaw's forehead. She rubbed a poultice of herbs on it. Frostpaw winced as the juices stung the cut.

"That'll keep it from getting infected," Clearstream said. "But, it seems shallow, so I expect it will heal without a problem. Do you have any other wounds?"

"My paw was bitten," Frostpaw said, extending her forepaw towards the medicine cat.

Clearstream carefully studied the paw.

"It doesn't appear to have broken the skin. The paw might be sore for a day, but it should be fine," Clearstream chirped cheerfully,

before turning towards Autumnpaw and Poolpaw.

"Where are your wounds?" she asked.

Clearstream put some poultice on a scratch on Autumnpaw's side, and dabbed a bit on Poolpaw's bitten shoulder before declaring the group of apprentices good, and moving on to the next cat.

As the feasting settled down as every cat in the clan ate their full, Sedgestar rose to his paws, raising his tail for attention. The clan quieted their conversations, and once more turned towards their leader.

"I have one more announcement to make tonight," Sedgestar said, a low purr rumbling in his voice. "And, it is one that fills me with joy and pride. Damppaw and Dewpaw, will you please step forward?"

The two apprentices strode out of the crowd to stand before Sedgestar. Frostpaw noticed they had taken the time to clean their pelts after the battle. Damppaw's dark pelt gleamed with inky blackness, and Dewpaw's grey pelt billowed like storm clouds around her. Besides Damppaw's herb-plastered newly torn ear and Dewpaw's scratched nose, their pelts looked unblemished, and they looked at their leader with shining eyes. Sedgestar lifted his head high, angling his gaze upwards to search the overcast sky. Some of the cloud cover had broken, and there was a few slivers of sky from which the stars of Silverpelt blinked through.

"The clouds have parted so our warrior ancestors can watch over us!" Sedgestar said, his voice ringing throughout camp. "We must have their blessing for this ceremony. I, Sedgestar, leader of ShadowClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They fought valiantly tonight to protect the honor of ShadowClan, and I have found them to be more than worthy of their warrior names."

Sedgestar dropped his head to search Damppaw and Dewpaw's gazes.

"Damppaw and Dewpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your

lives?"

"*I do*," Damppaw and Dewpaw's voices rang out in chorus.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names," Sedgestar said, his chin held high. "Damppaw, from this moment on you will be known as Dampfang. StarClan honors your bravery and strength. Dewpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Dewleaf. StarClan honors your loyalty and determination. And, we welcome you both as full warriors of ShadowClan!"

The clan cheered as Sedgestar rested his muzzle first on Dampfang's head, then on Dewleaf's.

"Dampfang! Dewleaf! Dampfang! Dewleaf!" Frostpaw cheered along with her clanmates.

Looking at Dampfang and Dewleaf's proudly raised heads, for the first time Frostpaw felt a thrill of excitement pass through her at the thought of one day being in their pawsteps, listening to ShadowClan cheer her name. She imagined the pride she would see in Redclaw and Weaseltail's faces, Sedgestar's contented expression as he watched his clan grow, and even maybe grudging admiration in Swoopstrike's eyes.

As the cheering died down, cats moved to congratulate the newly named warriors. There was some more yawning here and there too, and Frostpaw saw Amberberry usher Mosskit and Murmurkit towards the nursery.

"But, Mom! Why can't we stay up longer? We're going to be made apprentices any day now!" Mosskit protested.

"That's true, but until your name ends with a 'paw and not a 'kit, you still have to do as I say," Amberberry scolded, nudging her daughters along.

Frostpaw found herself stifling yawns herself, the weariness of her muscles from the battle catching back up to her. It seemed too almost like her cuts were stinging a bit more as if in echo of her tiredness.

"Lets go congratulate Dampfang and Dewleaf, then head to our nests," Autumnpaw said, rising to his paws and yawning. "I'm exhausted."

"Speak for yourself," Poolpaw said, puffing his chest out. "I still feel like I could take on three WindClan cats. I think I'll stay out for a bit longer and chat with them before they have to do their vigils."

"And, listen to Dampfang yammer on all night about how great he was in the battle?" Autumnpaw asked with an eye-roll, leading the way across the camp towards the new warriors with Frostpaw and Poolpaw following. "*Thank StarClan* warrior vigils are silent or no cat would get any sleep tonight."

Frostpaw and Poolpaw purred in amusement.

"You got that right," Poolpaw said.

Frostpaw shot a look at Poolpaw out of the corner of her eyes.

"Although, I think Poolpaw might be more concerned about Dewleaf than with Dampfang..." Frostpaw said, a quiet bit of mischievousness creeping into her voice.

Poolpaw widened his eyes at Frostpaw.

"What!?" Autumnpaw said, dramatically whirling around. "Is this true? Poolpaw, explain yourself."

"Shut up, you frog-brains!" Poolpaw hissed, embarrassed heat rolling off his prickling black-and-white fur. "They can hear us!"

"This conversation is not over!" Autumnpaw said, but Poolpaw bounded ahead of him to greet Dampfang, Dewleaf and Pinepaw who were chatting together.

"How did you know Poolpaw likes Dewleaf, and I didn't?" Autumnpaw asked in a quieter voice, turning to Frostpaw with a furrowed brow.

"Well it was more of a hunch than anything," Frostpaw admitted with a shrug. "He's not as obvious about it as Pinepaw is about

Dampfang."

"So, I guess I'm just dense then?" Autumnpaw said, his dark red tail flicking.

"Your words, not mine," Frostpaw said with a stifled purr.

"Ouch," Autumnpaw said teasingly, flicking his tail at Frostpaw, which she nimbly dodged.

As the two of them approached the group, Frostpaw noticed they were in the midst of a lively conversation, with Dampfang holding everybody's attention as he spoke and gestured wildly. Dampfang narrowed his eyes at Frostpaw as she sat down by Dewleaf and Poolpaw, but he didn't pause in his sentence.

"—So, once we got into the camp, we fell immediately down on the WindClan warriors. They sleep out in the open in the middle of the camp, by the way. Can you believe that? They must have cold and wet pelts so many nights. But, anyway, so we got into the camp without alerting their sentries, and we pounced on them while they were still sleeping! Ha! What a way to wake up, huh?" Dampfang said, his green eyes glinting in excitement.

Pinepaw was eagerly nodding along, looking entranced by him. Even Autumnpaw and Poolpaw's ears pricked in interest, despite their common complaints that he never shut up.

"Then once Sedgestar told us to retreat, we snatched up all the prey in their fresh-kill pile and went running!" Dampfang meowed.

"WindClan claims to be the fastest in the forest, but they didn't catch us," Dewleaf added, giving her paw a satisfied lick and drawing it across her whiskers.

"Yeah!" Dampfang agreed, his tail tip twitching. "We made it to the border with them fox-lengths behind."

"Where we were waiting for them!" Poolpaw added, digging his claws into the ground.

Autumnpaw nodded in satisfaction, turning to look at Frostpaw.

"Are you excited that you finally got some revenge on those WindClan cats who tried to attack you?" Autumnpaw asked.

Frostpaw shuffled her paws, the fur on the back of her neck prickling uncomfortably as the full attention of the group was turned on her.

"...Yeah," Frostpaw said, her voice didn't come out as enthusiastic as she'd intended.

Her brow furrowed and her thoughts reeled as Dampfang's and Pinepaw's gazes narrowed critically at her.

"I mean... it wasn't really about me though. They disrespected Sedgestar and ShadowClan. That's why they needed to be taught a lesson," Frostpaw added rapidly, shooting a quick look at Autumnpaw for support.

Autumnpaw nodded along to her words, giving her a reassuring blink.

"Of course," he meowed.

"Well, *I* definitely enjoyed tearing them up!" Pinepaw cut in, jumping to her paws.

"I'm mean, you four haven't been training long," Dampfang drawled, casting his green gaze harshly over the four apprentices like he wasn't an apprentice himself only a few heartbeats ago. "But, this is WindClan that we're talking about, and everyone knows that they're scrawny cowards. So, I'm sure they weren't too much of a problem for you to fight."

Dampfang's gaze slid over to Frostpaw.

"Even for someone like you," he added pointedly to her.

Frostpaw clenched her jaw. Her stomach tightened as a rush of anxiety washed over her, but Autumnpaw jumped in before she could say anything.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Autumnpaw said, a slight warning

growl in his voice. "Frostpaw has been training just as long as me or my littermates. She fights just as well as we do too."

Dampfang shrugged, his sticky green gaze sliding from Frostpaw to Autumnpaw.

"Training can only do so much though, right?" Dampfang said. "What I'm talking about is *blood.* You can't change that. I mean... a squirrel will never learn how to fly no matter how many times it jumps out a tree. Even if it was raised by birds. Because it was born a squirrel. Not a bird."

Frostpaw's ears flattened, and her stomach rolled with hot anger. She wanted to snap at Dampfang that it wasn't true, that she was just as much as a ShadowClan cat as him, and she would be just as good as a warrior— No. A *better* warrior than him someday. But, strangely her throat felt bone-dry, and she could not make any words come. Not that it would make a difference anyway; what could she even say to change a cat like Dampfang's mind?

Her fur prickled with heat— half in anger, and half in shame from her inability to defend herself. Frostpaw jerkily rose to her paws and whirled away from the group, stalking towards the apprentices' den with tense muscles.

"You must have tadpoles in your brain because Frostpaw is a *cat,* just like you and me and the rest of us, not a bird or a squirrel!" Frostpaw heard Autumnpaw snarling behind her. "That's all that matters!"

"Not true. Blood is very important," Dampfang sneered. "Does a WindClan cat like to swim? No. But, RiverClan does. That's a difference in blood."

Frostpaw heard Autumnpaw growling something in a low, angry voice, but then Poolpaw's voice cut in.

"He's not worth it," Poolpaw muttered.

I wonder if Pinepaw agrees with Dampfang, Frostpaw thought, her jaw clenching.

But, she knew she couldn't look back and check the she-cat's expression; that would just add to her already horribly embarrassing exit. Her stomached churned; she must look like such a pathetic coward to them, running away.

"What's going on?"

Swoopstrike appeared out of nowhere as Frostpaw thought he so often did, his green eyes not missing a thing as they swept over Frostpaw's prickling pelt and clenched jaw.

"—Dampfang..." Frostpaw growled, her voice coming back to her.

She shook her head. There wasn't a point in telling Swoopstrike. Then he would just think she was a pathetic coward too, which wouldn't benefit anyone.

"Don't worry about it. I'm handling it," Frostpaw said through clenched fangs, turning her gaze away from him.

Swoopstrike's gaze studied her face carefully.

"Good," he said in his curt tones.

Swoopstrike turned away from her, and Frostpaw continued towards the apprentices' den.

"Frostpaw," Swoopstrike said with a tail flick, drawing her attention back to him. "Remember what Sedgestar said. Quiet, hidden strength is what ShadowClan values. The cat that yowls the loudest doesn't win. Just be unyielding."

Frostpaw's brow furrowed, wondering how much her mentor was able to decipher about Dampfang just from her expression. But, she nodded to him before turning again and padding into the dark apprentices' den.

Frostpaw headed to her nest. Even though Dampfang and Dewleaf wouldn't be sleeping in this den any longer, giving the remaining apprentices more space, Frostpaw still curled up in her cramped nest, pushed tight against the side of the holly bush. She closed her eyes, hoping for sleep to wash over her quickly.

The entrance to the den rustled, and Autumnpaw's earthy scent drifted over to Frostpaw as he pushed his way inside the holly bush. Frostpaw kept her eyes tightly shut, pretending to be asleep. Her stomach still clenched anxiously as her humiliating retreat played over again and again in her mind.

I can't face him... not yet.

Frostpaw heard Autumnpaw pad into the den, growling quietly to himself. He paused his growling and then more rustling began. As the rustling persisted and grew increasing louder, Frostpaw cracked one of her eyes open a tiny sliver, overcome by curiosity. Autumnpaw was in the center of the den, clawing up Dampfang's old nest and viciously kicking it out of the apprentice's den. Frostpaw closed her eyes again before Autumnpaw could notice, and she continued to pretend to sleep, waiting for her mounting exhaustion to make it a reality. Eventually Autumnpaw's rustling died down after he must have gotten every scrap of moss that smelt like Dampfang out of the den.

Frostpaw was teetering on the verge of sleep, her thoughts becoming more and more incoherent when she felt a muzzle gently nudging her shoulder, snapping her out of it. Frostpaw's eyes flickered open, and she was greeted by Autumnpaw's shadowed form standing over her.

"Hey..." he meowed in an abnormally serious voice, blinking dark amber eyes down at her. "I got rid of Dampfang's nest, so there's more room in the center of the den now. I moved my nest over there, and you can come put yours next to mine if you want. It's less drafty in the center."

Autumnpaw's gaze flickered towards the holly branches that reached their way from the side of the den and into Frostpaw's nest.

"And, less poke-y," he added, a hint of his normal mischief appearing back in his gaze.

At the sound of his joking voice, Frostpaw couldn't stop a soft purr from rumbling in her throat.

"...Okay," she murmured quietly.

Frostpaw rose from her nest, and Autumnpaw helped her move the moss, pine needles, and feathers over a few tail-lengths into the center of the den, reassembling a cozy nest for her there, right to his. The tightness in her stomach miraculously gone, Frostpaw curled up in her new nest, wrapped herself into a ball, and covered her muzzle with her tail. Frostpaw felt Autumnpaw circle in his nest beside hers, and his back brushed hers as he curled himself into a tight ball.

"Goodnight, Frostpaw," Autumnpaw meowed.

"Goodnight, Autumnpaw," Frostpaw replied, a quiet purr in her voice.

Frostpaw's eyes drifted shut, and sleep draped over her effortlessly.

Watch and Wait

In the days following the battle with WindClan, a feeling of normality settled over ShadowClan once more. After their firm defeat on their own territory, WindClan stopped pushing their luck on the border, and Frostpaw spent her days training, and hunting, and patrolling, the trouble with WindClan forgotten, for now at least.

A few sunrises after the battle, Mosspaw and Murmurpaw were made apprentices, and given to Dappledpelt and Thornheart, respectively. And, the apprentice den was full once more, made especially lively by the talkative Mosspaw. Frostpaw was on a dawn patrol with Mosspaw, Swoopstrike, Dappledpelt, and Dewleaf now. Frostpaw nodded patiently along as Mosspaw went on and on, leaving Frostpaw idly wondering how the she-cat managed to speak for so long without seemingly taking a breath.

"This is only my second patrol," Mosspaw was saying to her now. "I went on the first one to tour our territory, of course. But, I've only done hunting training and moss duty since then, so this is my first proper border patrol! Oh! Do you think we'll see any WindClan cats? Ha, although I don't think WindClan will want to show their faces around us after we beat them so bad not that long ago. What about ThunderClan? Are they actually as big as the elders say they are? I always thought that must be an exaggeration—"

"We won't be seeing any enemy warriors if you keep pattering on like that," Swoopstrike snapped from where he was walking in front of the two apprentice, whipping his head around to lock Mosspaw in his scorching green gaze. "I swear, every cat in the forest must be able to hear you from here to Highstones!"

Mosspaw's ears flattened, and her jaws clamped shut against her stream of words. The cream-furred apprentice's shoulders slouched as she deflated, and Frostpaw shot her a sympathetic glance. She'd been on the receiving end of Swoopstrike's scolding enough times by now to know how much it could sting.

The fur on Dappledpelt's shoulders bristled, and she turned to glare at Swoopstrike.

"Don't talk to my apprentice that way!" Dappledpelt snapped back at him, raking his pelt with a gaze that was as sharp as thorns.

Swoopstrike's ears flattened at her rebuke, his tail tip twitching.

Frostpaw thought the dappled tortoiseshell warrior seemed very defensive of Mosspaw. Maybe it was because she was her first apprentice. Although Frostpaw was pretty sure that she was Swoopstrike's first apprentice too, but he didn't seem to worry about being too harsh with her.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed slightly as she noted that Dappledpelt and Swoopstrike were close in age, and must have been den-mates in the nursery and apprentice den together.

I wonder if that's why she's not afraid to put Swoopstrike in his place—she's been dealing up with his grumpy mood her entire life!

Swoopstrike rolled his eyes at Dappledpelt.

"I'm just saying, ShadowClan is known for being *silent*, right?" Swoopstrike said. "The best stalkers in the forest? Ever heard of that? Being loud is just un-ShadowClan."

"Oh, *shut up,* frog-brain," Dappledpelt said, with an eye roll in response. "She's just excited. I know the concept of happiness is hard to grasp for a cat who's heart is as barren and frigid as yours, but *try* to imagine."

"If my heart is cold and dead, it's only because you made it that way," Swoopstrike retorted hotly, but Frostpaw thought she could defect a hint of playfulness in his voice that was unusual for him. *"StarClan,* you drain the life out of everything you touch. You know, Sedgestar was actually going to give you the warrior name 'Deathtouch,' but I thought it was too mean, so I convinced him to just go with 'Dappledpelt' instead."

"No, I think you've gotten me confused with yourself," Dappledpelt said haughtily, sticking her muzzle up in the air. "Ask anyone in the

clan. Especially your poor sister. You're so unbearable, it's a miracle Snakeeyes didn't do us all a favor and strangle you when you two were only kits."

Dappledpelt flicked Swoopstrike's flank with a lash of her tail, and Swoopstrike sprung away from her touch like it was burning fire.

"*Ack!* Stay away from me, Deathtouch! My heart will give out, and I'm too young to die!" Swoopstrike yowled, recoiling from her.

Dappledpelt huffed offendedly, her tail swishing from side to side.

"Come on, Mosspaw! Let's run ahead to the ThunderClan border before this *noisy, un-ShadowClan* frog-brain scares away all the cats 'from here to Highstones!'" Dappledpelt shouted the final jab over her shoulder, and she opened her stride, eating up the ground.

Mosspaw followed her into the trees, as did Dewleaf, who was purring loudly with amusement from their whole interaction. Frostpaw hung back with Swoopstrike, figuring that he wouldn't be pleased if his own apprentice abandoned him too.

Frostpaw studied Swoopstrike's face as he watched Dappledpelt run away with a green gaze that shimmered like a pool of water in the sunlight. But, Swoopstrike seemed to sense Frostpaw's eyes on him, and his gaze flickered to her.

"What?" he snapped, his eyes narrowing, the spark of warmth that was in them only a heartbeat ago vanishing as quickly as it appeared.

Frostpaw just looked away and shrugged.

Not saying anything was probably the best course of action here, but she couldn't stop her whiskers from twitching in smug amusement. Swoopstrike huffed, giving himself a shake.

"Let's head to the border," he said in his normal curt tones, taking off at a sprint.

Frostpaw followed.

They caught up with the rest of their patrol at the edge of the thunderpath. Dappledpelt's ear twitched when Swoopstrike and Frostpaw approached but besides that didn't acknowledge them. The ShadowClan patrol prowled down the edge of the thunderpath, remarking their borders in the shade of the trees as monsters roared past. Mosspaw, still not accustomed to the loud beasts, jumped at every passing. The thunderpath quieted down for a bit, and as the sharp tang of monster scent faded, Frostpaw's nose twitched as it picked up a new scent— cat scent.

"ThunderClan," Swoopstrike hissed the warning, catching the same scent Frostpaw had.

The ShadowClan patrol instinctively crouched down in the darkness beneath the pines, and turned to gaze across the thunderpath, their sharp eyes scanning the dark undergrowth on the other side to search for any movement. It wasn't long before some bushes on the ThunderClan side of the border rustled and a patrol of four cats pushed their way through. Frostpaw recognized one brown tom as Acornear, the ThunderClan deputy, but the other warriors, a tortoiseshell she-cat, a ginger she-cat, and a grey-and-white tom, were unfamiliar to her. The ThunderClan warriors hadn't seemed to notice the ShadowClan patrol hidden in the shadows across the thunderpath, and they continued on their way down the edge of their tree line undisturbed. Acornear split away from the rest of his patrol to pad out from under the trees and approach the edge of the thunderpath.

Frostpaw noticed Swoopstrike tense beside her, like he was afraid that the ThunderClan deputy would try to cross the thunderpath and into their territory. But, Acornear stopped right at the edge of the black, sticky stone of the thunderpath and bent his head to sniff at some crowfood lying there. Frostpaw squinted, trying to make out the shape. She thought it might be a squirrel, but it was hard to tell because its body was rather mangled by the monster that had killed it. Frostpaw's eyes widened in shock as Acornear opened his jaws to pick up the crowfood, which was exactly when Swoopstrike moved out from under the shadows of the trees to stride out towards the thunderpath.

"Has ThunderClan gotten so weak that it needs monsters to do their

hunting for them?" Swoopstrike sneered, his voice ringing across the thunderpath.

Acornear's head snapped up in surprise, dropping the crowfood back on the ground. The rest of the ThunderClan patrol turned to face the sound of Swoopstrike's voice, their pelts bristling.

"I hear that crowfood that sits on the side of the thunderpath for sunrises acquires a very *unique* flavor," Dappledpelt added, padding out to stand at Swoopstrike's side. "ThunderClan must like that."

Swoopstrike nodded at Dappledpelt's words, his face mockingly thoughtful. Frostpaw's ears flicked back with nervousness. He and Dappledpelt made a frightening team when their biting words were working in tandem instead of battling against each other.

"You sure do talk a lot for a Clan that eats rats and two-leg trash at the Carrionplace," the ginger ThunderClan she-cat snarled in reply, dashing up to the side of the thunderpath with a bristling pelt.

"I wonder," Swoopstrike continued, ignoring the ginger cat. "Does ThunderClan let all of their freshkill sit out until it starts rotting or is crowfood like this a treat for special occasions?"

"Enough," Acornear snarled, and Frostpaw saw a gleaming flash of claws as he dug them into the ground in fury. "I won't tolerate these insults on my own territory!"

"Your territory?" Dewleaf echoed, her eyes wide in mock surprise, as she emerged from hiding to pad up to join Swoopstrike and Dappledpelt.

Frostpaw hesitantly crept out behind them, her belly tight with nerves as she waited to see if the tenseness between the patrols would break out into a full-out fight. Mosspaw was at her side, and the younger apprentice's eyes were wide and her fur all bushed out, looking equal parts frightened and excited.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but I think you must be confused," Dappledpelt said, her lip curled up slightly. "We are over here on the ShadowClan side of the thunderpath, having a conversation among ourselves on

our territory. Whatever you happen to overhear is not our fault."

"Yes, it's absurd to even think that we would want to talk to ThunderClan," Swoopstrike sniffed, turning to Dappledpelt. "I've met smarter squirrels. They would hold a conversation better."

The ThunderClan patrol let out a few loud growls and angry yowls.

"Hey!" Dappledpelt snapped, whipping her head around to shoot a scorching look at the ThunderClan cats. "We are having a private conversation over here! Eavesdropping is very rude!"

"I've had enough of this mockery!" Acornear snarled, his brown fur bristling out. "Get them!"

The ThunderClan patrol went charging across the thunderpath, yowling battlecries.

"Drive the intruders back!" Swoopstrike yowled just as the ThunderClan patrol made their final bounds across the thunderpath and into ShadowClan territory.

The cats clashed together. Frostpaw barely had time to think before she threw herself at the ginger she-cat, hissing. This scuffle was close-quarters, trapped right at the edge of the thunderpath, and very heated. Unlike the battle against WindClan, there was no plan, no grand strategy, just cat versus cat— scratching, hissing, biting. Frostpaw growled as the ginger she-cat cut her shoulder with her claws, and she retaliated by springing on to the ginger cat's back, digging her claws into her flanks and biting at her scruff. Before the fight could even truly begin though, a loud voice came ringing across the thunderpath.

"What is the meaning of this!" The voice thundered.

The ThunderClan cats scrambled away from the ShadowClan cats in shock, retreating towards the thunderpath and turning their heads towards the voice. Swoopstrike made to follow them with a growl, but Dappledpelt halted him with a twitch of her tail, her cautious, yet curious gaze telling the ShadowClan patrol to hold.

Over in ThunderClan territory, a tall pale grey tom stood at the

edge of the thunderpath with bristling fur, two other ThunderClan cats at his side. Frostpaw realized with a jolt that the grey tom was Morningstar, ThunderClan's leader.

"Morningstar, we—" Acornear began.

"Why in StarClan's name is my deputy on ShadowClan territory?" Morningstar snarled furiously, spittle flying from his lips. "Don't we have enough to deal with, with WindClan and SkyClan without you turning ShadowClan against us too? What's next? Are you going to go fishing on RiverClan territory and tell them we own the river now?"

Acornear's ears flattened, and he looked like he wanted to crawl out of his own skin rather than continue to be scolded by his leader in front of a ShadowClan patrol.

"They were mocking us, Morningstar!" Acornear protested. "I couldn't let what they were saying stand—"

"The health of my clan is more important to me than your fragile pride, Acornear," Morningstar cut him off, each word growled out through clenched fangs. "I've dragged my name through the mud for ThunderClan, and I would do much worse if it means our Clan's survival. Now. *Get. Back. Over. Here."*

"Let them go," Dappledpelt muttered to their patrol.

With flattened ears and drooped tails, the ThunderClan patrol went ashamedly running back across the thunderpath.

"Ha, mouse-hearts," Swoopstrike spat under his breath as they retreated.

Once all of the ThunderClan warriors were safely back on their side of the thunderpath, Morningstar turned to address the ShadowClan warriors.

"Give Sedgestar my sincerest apologies," Morningstar meowed, his chin raised, and his deep voice more composed. "My warriors were acting out of turn, against my wishes. And, I will ensure that it will *not* happen again."

"We will see what Sedgestar has to say about this," Swoopstrike responded haughtily, striding towards the edge of the thunderpath with his tail kinked and bushed out behind him. "But, we will pass on your message."

Morningstar nodded, then with a flick of his tail, indicating for his cats to follow, he turned and vanished into the undergrowth. Swoopstrike relaxed his aggressive posturing as the ThunderClan scent faded, lowering his tail to swish it thoughtfully behind him.

"Interesting," Dewleaf said.

"Very," Dappledpelt mused before turning to look at Mosspaw and Frostpaw.

"Is anyone hurt?" she asked.

Frostpaw shook her head. The cut on her shoulder stung a little, but it was only a scratch. Frostpaw turned to give the scratch a quick rasping with her tongue to clean it. Mosspaw also shook her head; her pelt was still bristled out, but it looked unmarked.

"Let's finish this border then then head back to camp," Swoopstrike said, turning to lead the patrol down the tree-line, remarking bushes and trunks to drown out any remnants of ThunderClan scent.

"No, if no one is really hurt, we can finish the patrol and do the WindClan border too," Dappledpelt protested, following him. "You saw how cowed they all were by Morningstar, there's no need to rush back to Sedgestar about this."

"What if it was a ploy?" Swoopstrike growled from over his shoulder. "To make us lower our guard and think that they aren't planning to attack?"

"You think ThunderClan is able to plan that much ahead?" Dewleaf said with a scoff, padding over to them. "You said it yourself, most squirrels are smarter."

"Still they're up to something," Swoopstrike muttered.

"Acornear was picking up crowfood," Frostpaw added.

Swoopstrike locked her in his intense gaze, and Frostpaw swallowed nervously.

"So?" he asked.

"So... he was doing that before he saw us, which means that they were actually planning on eating it right?" Frostpaw murmured quietly.

"They are short on prey," Dappledpelt agreed, nodding approvingly at Frostpaw. "And, therefore weak and not a threat."

"*Or,* desperate *and* a threat," Swoopstrike argued, his chin jutting out stubbornly.

"Morningstar seemed genuine to me when he said that he didn't want to provoke us," Dappledpelt said with a shrug. "But, really it's Sedgestar's opinion on it that really matters. Which is why we'll tell him about this. *After* we finish our patrol."

Swoopstrike huffed.

"Fine," he grumbled, relenting.

"ThunderClan doesn't seem to be doing well," Mosspaw meowed to Frostpaw as the patrol continued down the border.

"Prey ran poorly for ThunderClan during leaf-bare," Frostpaw said. "And, it doesn't sound like they've recovered yet."

"Why?" Mosspaw asked, tilting her head inquisitively. "It's green-leaf now. Their forest should be filled with prey."

Frostpaw shrugged, unable to answer her.

Prey was running well in ShadowClan at least, and after the group finished the uneventful patrol down the WindClan border, Swoopstrike and Dappledpelt allowed their apprentices to hunt a bit on their way back to camp. Frostpaw caught a mouse and Mosspaw caught a frog. Dappledpelt seemed as delighted as Mosspaw at her

apprentice's catch, although Swoopstrike hissed something about frogs being the slowest and stupidest prey, making them the easiest to get and a newborn kitten could probably catch one.

"How do you put up with him being like this all the time?" Mosspaw muttered quietly to Frostpaw around the frog in her mouth as the patrol made their way back to camp, shooting Swoopstrike's back a fierce look.

Frostpaw's fur prickled slightly, and she felt an odd urge to defend her mentor. Swoopstrike was prickly and difficult and even mean sometimes, yes. But, he had come to her rescue more than one time, and Frostpaw had a nagging sense that his heart was good, underneath all of the thorns he cloaked it with.

"The ThunderClan thing is putting him on edge," Frostpaw whispered back. "He's normally not this bad."

Mosspaw just shrugged, her expression looking like she didn't entirely believe Frostpaw.

Soon the patrol reached the thorny barrier that surrounded the camp and pushed their way through the tunnel to go inside. Frostpaw winced as a thorn caught a tangle of her long fur and she lost a clump of it to the plant. The patrol dropped off the few pieces of prey that they brought back at the fresh-kill pile before Dappledpelt and Swoopstrike turned to search the camp for Sedgestar. Frostpaw spotted their leader near the entrance to the medicine cat's den at the base of Clanrock, chatting with Clearstream and Grovepelt as the three of them lounged in a pool of mid-day sunlight.

"How convenient. The medicine cat and the deputy are already here too," Dappledpelt said as she motioned for Swoopstrike to follow her towards Sedgestar.

"You two take care of that," Dewleaf said with a yawn. "I'm going to take a nap."

"Are we supposed to wait here?" Mosspaw whispered to Frostpaw as their mentors padded off towards their leader.

Frostpaw shrugged and crept forward to follow Swoopstrike, overcome by curiosity. Mosspaw shadowed her. The apprentices hung back a tail-length from the group as Dappledpelt and Swoopstrike walked right up to Sedgestar.

"Sedgestar, Grovepelt," Swoopstrike said.

Grovepelt's half-closed eyes blinked open, and he turned a gaze bleary with sleep onto Swoopstrike. Sedgestar halted his conversation with Clearstream, blinking an inquisitive gaze at the warrior. Swoopstrike took this look as an invitation to continue.

"There was a confrontation with ThunderClan at the border today," Swoopstrike growled.

"Is anyone hurt?" Clearstream asked, sweeping her sharp gaze over the pelts of Dappledpelt and Swoopstrike before gazing over at Mosspaw and Frostpaw.

"Only shallow scratches. We're all fine," Dappledpelt replied.

"What happened?" Sedgestar prompted.

"We saw the ThunderClanners, led by Acornear, sniffing around really closely to their side of the thunderpath. It looked like they were collecting crowfood to eat. We engaged them in conversation, which annoyed them, and they crossed the thunderpath to attack," Swoopstrike said. "But, they were quickly ordered back to their territory by Morningstar, who appeared with a different patrol, although they weren't happy to retreat. And, he apologized for their behavior, saying that it went against his wishes."

"They were planning on eating crowfood, you said?" Grovepelt reiterated, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"That's what it looked like, yes," Dappledpelt confirmed.

"Hm," Grovepelt mused, exchanging a look with Sedgestar.

Frostpaw saw thoughts flickering in their gazes like minnows, as if the leader and deputy were having a silent conversation.

"I believe Morningstar when he says he doesn't not intend to attack us," Sedgestar said after the thoughtful silence, turning to look back at Swoopstrike.

"So you don't think they are a threat?" Swoopstrike asked, his green gaze intense.

One of Sedgestar's ears flicked back.

"...I didn't say that," Sedgestar continued slowly. "Morningstar is a very candid cat. That doesn't mean that he doesn't keep secrets, but when he says something, he means it. Do you remember when he admitted ThunderClan was starving, and asked for territory to hunt in last leaf-bare? Can you imagine any other leader saying that?"

Swoopstrike and Dappledpelt shook their heads.

"So, what are you saying, Sedgestar?" Dappledpelt asked.

"I think ThunderClan is having some sort of problem," Sedgestar said. "And, they don't want to add us to the list."

Sedgestar turned to look at Clearstream.

"Has StarClan sent you any sort of warning?" he asked her.

The medicine cat shook her head.

"No, Sedgestar. They haven't delivered any prophecies since I saw the vision of the owl during leaf-bare," Clearstream said.

Sedgestar nodded thoughtfully.

"If the situation was dire for us, I think that our ancestors would warn us," he said. "So, the question then becomes: will ThunderClan's problem become our problem, or will they think that attacking us will solve their problem?"

"Morningstar mentioned something about 'dealing with' SkyClan and WindClan," Swoopstrike added his tail jutting up in excitement.

"Ah, Fennelstar and Rabbitstar. I should have suspected," Sedgestar

said, his ears flattening.

"I think Rabbitstar will calm down with time," Grovepelt spoke up. "He is inexperienced and hot-headed, but not stupid. After we defeated him in battle, I'm sure he will have been knocked down from his high perch. Green-leaf has only just begun—the moors will be full of rabbits, and he will realize that he has nothing to gain by antagonizing ThunderClan. Or, us for that matter. They don't even like being on territory under trees anyway."

Sedgestar nodded along in agreement.

"Fennelstar, on the other paw, has always been territory hungry since the moment he became leader," Grovepelt said. "And, it doesn't help that SkyClan territory and ThunderClan territory are so closely matched; they feel right home in it. Leaf-bare hit ThunderClan hard, and if SkyClan has not relented with pushing at their border, it is no surprise to me that ThunderClan is still struggling to find food."

"Yes, as difficult as it might be for poor Morningstar, I have always been grateful to have ThunderClan as a buffer between us and Fennelstar," Sedgestar said with a soft growl. "I don't think for a moment that he wouldn't try to sink his teeth into our pines, if he was close enough to reach."

"So, what should we do?" Dappledpelt asked, her tail twitching anxiously.

"We watch and wait for now," Sedgestar said. "In the meanwhile, I will shift our focus from the WindClan border to the ThunderClan. I believe Morningstar when he says that he doesn't want to attack us. But, if this skirmish is any indiction, his warriors, and deputy, seem restless and angry. It wouldn't be unthinkable that they go behind their leader's back to find prey in our territory."

Frostpaw's eyes flew wide at the idea. She couldn't imagine for one heartbeat any cat in ShadowClan so blatantly disobeying their leader's orders. Every ShadowClan cat held Sedgestar with the highest regard.

But, it sounds like other clans don't have as good of a leader as we do...

"The next gathering will be coming up in only a few sunrises," Sedgestar continued. "We should be able to get a better sense of the state of ThunderClan, and SkyClan, then."

Sedgestar flicked his tail to dismiss Dappledpelt and Swoopstrike. Swoopstrike turned around and his eyes went wide when he saw Frostpaw and Mosspaw standing so closely nearby.

"Were you two here the whole time?" Swoopstrike demanded.

"Relax Swoopstrike," Grovepelt said with a rumbling purr, his eyes already half-lidded with sleep again. "The apprentices are only curious, and this wasn't a private meeting."

Swoopstrike huffed, but didn't reply to the deputy.

"Go get something to eat," he said to Frostpaw. "And, relax for a bit. We'll continue training after sun-high is over."

"Same thing goes for you," Dappledpelt said to Mosspaw.

Frostpaw nodded. She padded over to the freshkill pile with Mosspaw. It was full of prey, and Frostpaw's belly rumbled when she spotted a juicy looking starling on the pile. But, as she sniffed at the pile of prey, she noticed Mosspaw watching her out of the corner of her eye, a hopeful expression on the younger apprentice's face. Frostpaw diverted away from the starling and picked up the frog Mosspaw had caught earlier.

"Mmm this looks great," Frostpaw said, blinking affectionately at Mosspaw.

Mosspaw's tail stuck up in delight, a purr rumbling in her throat. Mosspaw chose a shrew for herself and the two apprentices took their prey to a patch of sunlight on the ground to eat. As Frostpaw took the first bite of freshkill, she felt a little pang that she hadn't picked the starling, but as the days passed, the taste of frog was growing on her at least. As they ate, Frostpaw spotted Autumnpaw returning from training with Beeclaw. Frostpaw waved her tail to get his attention, and Autumnpaw headed over to them after

grabbing a piece of prey off the pile for himself.

"Hey Frostpaw, hey Mosspaw," he said after dropping his prey and plopping down next to Frostpaw. "How was your dawn patrol?"

"So exciting!" Mosspaw exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. "We got into a fight with ThunderClan!"

"Woah really?" Autumnpaw asked, around a mouthful of meat, his eyes wide.

He nudged Frostpaw's shoulder.

"Why do you manage to always get in trouble without me there?" he teased.

"It was barely a fight," Frostpaw added. "Morningstar called them back right away. He wasn't happy with his warriors."

"Then we talked to Sedgestar about it!" Mosspaw continued, her words spilling out of her mouth rapidly. "He thinks SkyClan and ThunderClan are fighting and that's why ThunderClan is being so weird. And, that the gathering is soon, and we'll try to figure out more then. It's so exciting! I hope I get to go! I'll try to talk to as many ThunderClan and SkyClan cats as possible. It'll be like being a spy!"

"That does sound interesting," Autumnpaw said, his tail-tip twitching thoughtfully. "I hope I'm chosen to go this next gathering."

"Me too," Frostpaw added. "I'd like to see what happens."

But, as Frostpaw spoke, her thoughts began to turn away from the ThunderClan and SkyClan mystery and drift towards another mystery surrounding just one cat— Paledusk, the SkyClan deputy. In her mind, she once again saw the white tom's wide-eyed gaze as he stared at her, the horrified recognition sweeping across his face like a wave.

Frostpaw's pelt prickled. Her thoughts had mostly been distracted by training for this past moon, but she hadn't forgotten about him.

She couldn't shake the feeling that he knew something about her or her mother, something more than he was letting on at least.

I'll talk to him next gathering.

Frostpaw's belly went tight with nerves at the thought, but she knew she had to do it. It would bother her forever like a thorn in her side if she was too much of a coward to talk to Paledusk.

"What are you thinking about?" Autumnpaw asked as he finished his fresh-kill, nudging her side as she stared emptily out into space.

Frostpaw shook her head like she was trying to shake off her thoughts.

"SkyClan," she meowed, semi-truthfully. "I just... want to know what's going on."

"Well, they are pretty far away from ShadowClan. So, hopefully whatever it is, it won't matter to us," Autumnpaw said with a yawn, lowering his head onto his paws.

Frostpaw sighed quietly as she thought of Paledusk.

She hoped Autumnpaw was right.

Frostpaw glanced over at him and watched as Autumnpaw was lulled to sleep by the warm sunlight. Even Mosspaw had grown quiet after she had filled her belly with food, and the soporific effect of sun-high crept over her. Soon Frostpaw was the only one left awake.

Sun-high

Hot sun-high light shone down on ShadowClan on the day of the full moon. Frostpaw lounged in a patch of sunlight at the edge of camp near the thorn bush that sheltered the nursery, thrown across the warmed earth so her fur could soak up all of the heat. Autumnpaw sat at her side, peacefully grooming his ears. A few tail lengths to Frostpaw's left, Mosspaw and Murmurpaw were engaged in eager conversation, and a little ways to Frostpaw's right, Poolpaw, Pinepaw, and Dewleaf were chatting and having some fresh-kill. Frostpaw's eyes drifted half-way shut as the warmth from the sunlight made her sleepy, but her ears stayed pricked as she listened to her neighbors' quiet conversations.

Sedgestar had announced the gathering patrol only moments before. Frostpaw and Autumnpaw had not been picked, although Pinepaw and Poolpaw would be going, as well as Dewleaf. Dewleaf seemed excited to attend her first gathering as a warrior. Mosspaw and Murmurpaw had also been chosen, and the sisters were both very eager to attend their first gatherings at all.

"I'm going to talk to as many cats as possible," Mosspaw was saying now. "But, especially SkyClan and ThunderClan cats. I'll be the one to figure out what's going on with them!"

"There was a SkyClan apprentice that I talked to last gathering, Larchpaw, I think is her name," Frostpaw said, opening her eyes to chime in. "She was nice. You should try to talk to her, if she is there."

"Good idea!" Mosspaw said with an excited nod.

Frostpaw purred and nodded back, but her mind had already drifted to Paledusk. She was disappointed that she wouldn't be able to talk to him this gathering. Now she would have to wait a whole other moon before she would be able to see him and talk to him about how he knew May! Frostpaw huffed.

That feels like forever from now.

"What's wrong?" Autumnpaw asked, picking up on her annoyance.

"You know," Frostpaw muttered, her tail-tip twitching slightly.

"Yeah, I'm disappointed that we don't get to go to the gathering too," Autumnpaw admitted. "But, it's not like Sedgestar can take every cat to the gathering every time. And, besides, there will be other full moons. We have our whole lives of gatherings to look forward to!"

"Do my ears deceive me, or do I hear Autumnpaw being reasonable for once?" Pinepaw's snarky voice cut in.

Frostpaw looked over at her. The she-cat had finished her food, and while Poolpaw and Dewleaf were still deep in some conversation with each other, she was looking over at Frostpaw and Autumnpaw with an unbearably smug look on her face.

"For once? I'm reasonable a lot," Autumnpaw argued, turning to glare at his sister.

"Ha. Are not," Pinepaw said with an amused huff.

"Well I'm also glad that I don't have to spend all night with you, you annoying fur-ball," Autumnpaw said, swatting a nearby twig in Pinepaw's direction. She ducked it, and it hit Poolpaw smack in the back of the head.

"HEY!" Poolpaw said, whirling around to rake Autumnpaw with a look that was as sharp as claws, and Pinepaw choked back loud purrs at the chaos unfolding before her.

"Run!" Autumnpaw yelped, giving Frostpaw a nudge and springing to his paws.

"Me?! I didn't do anything!" Frostpaw protested, but she obediently scrambled to her feet.

"You were sitting next to me, which makes you an accomplice!" Autumnpaw shouted over his shoulder as he booked it across camp.

Frostpaw was hot on his heels, and Poolpaw only a tail-length behind her.

"Faster Frostpaw!" Autumnpaw panted, dodging around warriors sleeping in patches of sunshine. "If he catches us, he'll sit on us until we're flatter than a leaf!"

"Climb the Oak Tree!" Frostpaw said through her panting breaths.

They sprinted over to it, Autumnpaw leading the way. Frostpaw took a flying leap at it, hooking her claws securely into the bark of the trunk. Tree climbing had always come naturally to her, and with only a few bounds of her powerful hind-legs, she had overtaken Autumnpaw and was fox-lengths up the trunk. Poolpaw frustratedly paced at the bottom of the tree as Frostpaw settled on a branch with Autumnpaw a few limbs below her.

"As soon as you come down here, Autumnpaw, I'll throw not just a twig, but a whole bramble bush in your face!" Poolpaw said, glaring up at his brother.

"I'd like to see you try!" Autumnpaw challenged, tauntingly lolling his tongue out at Poolpaw.

Pinepaw sauntered over to Poolpaw, with Dewleaf, Mosspaw, and Murmurpaw following her, all four of them purring so loudly Frostpaw could hear them from her perch all the way up in the tree.

"What's all this commotion?!" a voice snapped.

Frostpaw's heart sank rapidly as she recognized the arrogant voice, her amusement evaporating like a shallow pool of water on a blistering day.

Dampfang pushed his way out of the warriors' den, his fur still ruffled with sleep, and his green eyes narrowed in annoyance as he took in the scene. He strode over to the group at the base of the tree, his chest puffed out and muzzle angled upwards disdainfully.

"I can't believe you all, running around camp—" Dampfang said to Poolpaw, before swinging his muzzle up towards Frostpaw and Autumnpaw. "And, climbing trees like kits!"

"Well we can't all be as virtuous as you, Dampfang," Autumnpaw huffed in a mocking tone. "Imagine, if I also had your personality, we would have to make camp ten times bigger just so it could hold both of our egos. How inconvenient would that be?"

"Hilarious, Autumnpaw," Dampfang sneered. "I mean, I know you're only apprentices, but, Poolpaw, Autumnpaw, as *ShadowClan* cats, I expected better."

Anger started to simmer deep down in Frostpaw's belly as she noticed he deliberately didn't call her out.

I guess as a "non-clan" cat, I can't help my immature "kit-like" nature.

Frostpaw briefly allowed herself to fantasize about knocking a branch down onto Dampfang's head.

"Sorry. Being non-clan born makes me horribly clumsy."

"Ugh, put your claws away Dampfang," Dewleaf's voice cut in, pulling Frostpaw from her thoughts.

"Yeah," Pinepaw added. "It's sun-high so we don't have to hunt or patrol. We were just having some fun."

"Were you involved in this?" Dampfang asked Pinepaw, narrowing his eyes at her. "I expected better from you."

Pinepaw's ears twisted back, and Frostpaw thought she seemed to deflate some. But, Frostpaw's gaze was quickly pulled from the black-furred she-cat when she spotted new movement at the roots of the Oak Tree. Sedgestar emerged from the tunnel leading down into his den, his sharp eyes quickly taking in the scene before him before flicking up towards Frostpaw and Autumnpaw in the tree and settling on them.

"I thought I heard voices out here. Not sleepy this sun-high?" Sedgestar quipped.

Autumnpaw and Frostpaw mutely shook their heads. Frostpaw's shoulders tensed as she prepared for the possibility of a scolding from their clan leader. But, Sedgestar just turned aside, and

Frostpaw thought she spotted his whiskers faintly twitching in amusement.

"If you are going to the gathering, make sure you don't wear yourself out too much. I don't want my cats falling asleep during the other clan's announcements. That'll seem rude," Sedgestar said over his shoulder as he padded off towards the fresh-kill pile.

"But, Sedgestar! Autumnpaw and Frostpaw are in the Oak Tree!" Dampfang protested as Sedgestar padded away.

"I noticed," Sedgestar commented drily as he continued to walk away.

Dampfang huffed, but knowing there was nothing more that he could do, he too whipped around and stalked off, heading back into the warriors' den.

The mood was dampened by the confrontation, like a grey cloud had drifted over the group. Poolpaw backed away from the base of the tree, giving Autumnpaw and Frostpaw plenty of space to scramble down. When Frostpaw reached the ground, she gave her pelt a shake, wishing she could shake off this frosty interaction from her pelt as easily as she could water.

"Leave it to Dampfang to suck all the fun out of everything," Autumnpaw muttered, his tail twitching bitterly.

"Tell me about it," Poolpaw agreed, sticking his tongue out and screwing his face up in a disgusted expression.

"Hey, shut up!" Pinepaw hissed, whipping around to glare at her brothers.

The smug, self-satisfied amusement that had been on her face earlier had been replaced with hot anger, although Frostpaw thought she could detect a flash of hurt swirling in the amber depths of her eyes as well.

"What! It's true!" Autumnpaw protested, scowling.

"You frog-brains! It's your fault that Dampfang is mad at me now!"

Pinepaw spat.

"What are you meowing on about? He was the one that ruined it," Autumnpaw growled. "I'm pretty sure you were having just as much fun as we were, until *he* showed up."

"Was not," Pinepaw growled back, her fur bristling. "I was just watching."

Out of the corner of her eye, Frostpaw spotted Dewleaf, Mosspaw and Murmurpaw slowly backing away from the bristling siblings as the argument between them heated up. Frostpaw wished she could edge away as well, but she was trapped with the Oak Tree behind her, and her two snarling den-mates in front of her. Poolpaw's and Frostpaw's eyes met, and they swapped a concerned look.

"You all were acting like kits!" Pinepaw spat.

"Is that what you really think, or are you just saying that because Dampfang did?" Autumnpaw demanded, his tail twitching.

"I can think for myself," Pinepaw growled, taking an aggressive step forward so she and Autumnpaw stood nose to nose.

"Come on, let's just calm down..." Poolpaw broke in hesitantly, but his siblings barreled on.

"Can you though?" Autumnpaw retorted, ignoring Poolpaw's interruption and putting on a taunting falsetto. *"'Oh, Dampfang, said that. Oh, Dampfang did that.'* You never shut up about him."

"Don't mock me," Pinepaw snarled, her amber eyes narrowing into furious slits. "This is just what I was talking about. You're so immature Autumnpaw. You'll never become a warrior at this rate."

"If Dampfang is so much better than me, then why do you even waste your time hanging out with us!?" Autumnpaw shouted. "Well, fine then! I hope I never see your stupid frog-face around me again! *I don't want you here!"*

Pinepaw's eyes went wide, and she blinked hard at Autumnpaw—shock, hurt, and anger clearly written across her face.

"What's going on here?" Grovepelt's stern voice broke in.

He was padding over to the group of apprentices, drawn in by the yowling.

"Nothing!" Pinepaw said, quickly choking the word out before whirling around and dashing around Poolpaw to charge towards the apprentice's den, her black pelt disappearing under the holly bush.

"ShadowClan does not fight within itself," Grovepelt said to Autumnpaw, locking the apprentice in a firm gaze.

Autumnpaw just shrugged, staring down at the ground with his chin set mutinously, not responding to the deputy. As Frostpaw watched the still shaking branches of the holly bush, she felt her stomach slightly twist in sympathy for Pinepaw.

"You went too far," she muttered to Autumnpaw as Grovepelt padded away again.

"What! *Me?"* Autumnpaw asked incredulously, turning to look at Frostpaw with wide eyes. "You're not on my side? Are you seriously defending her and Dampfang? When he's always so horrible to you?!"

"I'm not on anybody's side," Frostpaw muttered, her tail-tip twitching slightly. "I'm just saying you were a bit mean to Pinepaw."

Autumnpaw huffed in exasperation.

"And, how many times has she been mean to me? Or, you?" he muttered.

Frostpaw's tail twitched, but she didn't respond. Frostpaw padded away from him, heading towards the apprentices' den. She hesitated at the entrance for a few heartbeats before pushing her way inside. Frostpaw blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the den. Pinepaw was alone in the den, curled up in her nest, covering her face with her paws.

"Go away," Pinepaw growled without uncovering her eyes.

"I...I just wanted to make sure that you were okay," Frostpaw muttered. "And, say that I know Autumnpaw didn't mean what he said..."

"Why do you care, frog-brain?" Pinepaw snapped, uncovering her eyes with her paws to glare over at Frostpaw. "It's not like you ever liked me anyway."

Frostpaw blinked, her brow furrowing.

I never liked you?! ***You** never liked me!*

Frostpaw clenched her jaw to bite back the words, but Pinepaw's gaze narrowed at Frostpaw like she had somehow seen her thoughts anyway.

"Whatever," Pinepaw growled, turning away from Frostpaw. "Just leave me alone."

Fine.

Frostpaw's tail twitched, and she turned, pushing her way back out of the den.

Frostpaw gave her pelt a shake as she entered back into the sunlight. She saw Autumnpaw and Poolpaw had moved across camp and were sitting in the shadows cast by the thorn thicket that surrounded camp. Frostpaw gazed over at them, hoping that Autumnpaw wasn't also mad at her now like Pinepaw was. Frostpaw sighed.

I know Pinepaw can be difficult, but why do she and Autumnpaw always have to fight? Wouldn't everyone be happier if they could just go a day without ruffling each other's fur?

Frostpaw took a deep breath of the warm air, letting it soothe her as she steeled herself to walk over to Autumnpaw and Poolpaw.

"Lizardkit! Watch where you're going!"

Snakeeyes' voice rang across the clearing as Lizardkit came barreling in front of Frostpaw, nearly crashing into her as he shot

after a moss-ball. Frostpaw stumbled slightly as she swerved around the small, pure-white kit. Lizardkit showed no sign of stopping though, until he finished the chase and caught the moss-ball. He gave a squeak of victory as he pounced on it, whirling around to gaze up at Frostpaw with the scrap of moss hanging from his mouth, his bright blue eyes gleaming in delight. He trotted over to Frostpaw, his tail stuck up proudly, the moss-ball dangling from his jaws like it was some great catch that he wanted to show off to her.

Autumnpaw and Pinepaw's argument forgotten at the appearance of the kit, Frostpaw peered down at Lizardkit, purring encouragingly at him. Snakeeyes kits were all around one moon now, and they seemed to be turning into very boisterous little things. They had just recently starting exploring the camp, and Lizardkit seemed to be the boldest of the three.

"I told you three to keep your play close to the nursery!" Frostpaw could hear Snakeeyes scolding her kits. "You'll just be under-paw if you play in the middle of camp!"

"Sorry!" Featherkit squeaked, her words still having a kit-like lisp, like her mouth hadn't quite mastered the art of speaking yet. "I hit it too hard!"

"Lizardkit, come back over here!" Snakeeyes called.

Lizardkit had dropped the moss-ball on the ground in front of him and Frostpaw and had been batting it back and forth between his front paws. But, he seemed to ignore his mother's call, and instead he tilted his head up to gaze deliberately into Frostpaw's eyes. With a wave of his paw, he made a gesture like he was going to hit the moss-ball, but Frostpaw watched as he seemed to intentionally miss the ball before sitting back, curling his tail around his paws, looking up at her expectantly.

"It sounds like your mom wants you, Lizardkit," Frostpaw said.

Lizardkit tilted his head at her, his gaze carefully trained on her mouth. Lizardkit looked back down, and Frostpaw thought he would get up, but again he just carefully mimed hitting the moss-ball before looking back up at Frostpaw.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed.

"I can't play with you right now. Your mom is calling for you," Frostpaw repeated.

Lizardkit sighed and flopped dramatically onto the ground, going back to hitting the moss-ball between his front paws, but doing so a bit more subduedly this time.

Snakeeyes padded over to them. Lizardkit's gaze flickered over to her as she approached, but he still didn't get to his paws or come over to her.

"Come on. Back to the nursery, you," Snakeeyes said, nosing her son to his paws with her muzzle.

Lizardkit made sure to snatch the moss-ball back up in his mouth as he got to his feet. Snakeeyes nudged him towards the nursery. Lizardkit took a few steps in that direction before turning to look back at Snakeeyes.

"Go," Snakeeyes said with a firm nod.

Lizardkit continued on towards the nursery, his slow steps turning into a quicker trot as he approached his siblings, who greeted him with excited squeaks as he pounced on his brother Yewkit, and the three of them went scampering back into the darkness under the thorn bush.

Snakeeyes sighed as her kits disappeared into the nursery.

"Sorry if Lizardkit was bothering you, Frostpaw," she said, her brow furrowed.

"Oh no, he's fine," Frostpaw said, studying the worried look on the queen's face. "But... is something wrong, Snakeeyes?"

Snakeeyes hesitated for a moment.

"I'm sure it's nothing..." she meowed slowly. "But, I'm just worried about Lizardkit. He hardly listens, and he's been taking longer than his siblings to learn to talk. When I speak to him, I'm not even sure

if he understands what I'm saying at all half the time."

Snakeeyes shifted her weight from paw to paw like just speaking her fears out loud made her uneasy.

"I just hope that he's not sick... or something isn't... wrong..." she muttered.

"He seems bright and curious to me," Frostpaw said quickly, trying to reassure the queen. "But, if you are worried, why don't you have Clearstream take a look a him and check?"

"Yeah, maybe I will ask Clearstream to make sure that he's healthy," Snakeeyes said, sounding slightly relieved as if she had just been waiting for someone to bring the medicine cat up. "In fact, I'll go get her now. Do you mind keeping an eye on my kits for a moment?"

The three of them had wandered back out of the nursery, but were wrestling close to the entrance of the thorn bush.

"Ok," Frostpaw said.

"Thank you, I'll be back in just a flick of a tail," Snakeeyes said, padding quickly over towards Clanrock, and the medicine cat's den that it sheltered.

Meanwhile, Frostpaw padded over to the kits. They were so busy playing with each other and scraps of moss that they hadn't even noticed their mother walking away.

Lizardkit was the first to notice Frostpaw approaching them. He tilted his head back to look over at her from his perch on top of his brother's back. Yewkit was pinned to the ground beneath him, his silver striped fur writhing as he tried to escape his brother's grip.

"Who are you?" Featherkit chirped to Frostpaw, dropping the moss-ball she had been playing with and bounding excitingly over to her.

"I'm Frostpaw," she said.

"Wow, you're an apprentice? Mom says that cats that have 'paw in their name means they're apprentices," Yewkit said, stumbling to his

paws after Lizardkit finally let him up.

"Yep, that's right," Frostpaw said.

"Have you fought a lot?" Featherkit asked, her eyes wide.

"I've been in one battle against WindClan," Frostpaw said. "And, a few border scraps."

Yewkit and Featherkit squealed excitedly at her answer, leaping around. Frostpaw glanced over at Lizardkit. He hadn't let out the same excited noises as his siblings, but when they started leaping around, his ears pricked in excitement, and he too rose to his paws.

"Does Lizardkit talk much?" Frostpaw asked Featherkit and Yewkit as they settled down some, her brow furrowing in slight concerned as she looked at the all white kitten.

"No. He doesn't like to talk," Featherkit said in a matter-of-fact voice.

After his siblings had stopped jumping around, Lizardkit had sat back down too. Now he was watching Featherkit's mouth move as she talked with a slight head-tilt in the same way he had watched Frostpaw talk earlier.

"Why don't you like to talk, Lizardkit?" Frostpaw asked him.

Lizardkit didn't look at her. He was still staring at his sister.

"He doesn't understand," Yewkit said. "You have to go like this."

Yewkit waved his tail. Lizardkit's gaze snapped from his sister to him. Yewkit nodded towards Frostpaw, and Lizardkit's gaze moved to her. Lizardkit's ears pricked in attention, and he gave Frostpaw a happy blink, letting out a quiet, inquisitive *"mrrow?"* noise. He rose to his paws, picking up the moss-ball Featherkit had dropped, and trotted over to Frostpaw, carrying it over to her. He dropped it on the ground in front of her, and mimed hitting the ball as he had done earlier.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed in confusion.

"You want me to hit it right?" she asked.

Lizardkit again watched her speak, but didn't respond. Frostpaw slowly reached a paw out and sent the moss-ball flying with a firm hit.

Lizardkit shot after the ball, making a big leap to snatch it out of the air before it got too far away. He trotted back with it quickly, his tail stuck up in excitement. He dropped the moss-ball again at Frostpaw's feet, and made the same gesture of hitting the ball, his blue eyes sparkling with excitement. Frostpaw hit the ball again for him. As she did, this time, Lizardkit whirled around in an excited circle before charging after the ball. Frostpaw purred at the little kit's exuberance, feeling her earlier concern melting away. Lizardkit was a bit odd, yes, but it seemed clear that Snakeeyes' worries were unfounded. He was still a happy, healthy kit.

As Lizardkit came trotting back with the moss-ball, Snakeeyes came walking over as well, with Clearstream in tow.

"Hello, Frostpaw," Clearstream purred in her delicate voice as she padded up to her and the kits. "How have you been doing?"

"I'm well, Clearstream," Frostpaw said with a respectful head dip to the medicine cat.

"Thanks for watching them," Snakeeyes said, settling down as her kits ran over to her, casting curious glances at Clearstream.

"Who are you?" Featherkit said in her squeaky voice, and Frostpaw couldn't help but purr slightly as the kit parroted the same inquisitive question that she had asked Frostpaw only a few moments before to Clearstream.

"I'm one of your medicine cats," Clearstream said with a warm purr. "My name is Clearstream."

"Are you here to play with us?" Yewkit asked excitedly. "Frostpaw was playing with us."

"I'm here to see how you three are doing. You said you were playing with Frostpaw. Do you all like to play?" Clearstream asked, her blue

eyes shimmering.

"Yes!" Yewkit and Featherkit chorused, leaping around excitedly.

Lizardkit leapt to his paws, watching his siblings with an equally excited gaze.

"What about you, Lizardkit?" Clearstream asked, turning to look at the white tom.

He didn't respond, his gaze still on his siblings.

"He likes to play the best!" Yewkit answered for Lizardkit. "Look!"

Yewkit sprung at Lizardkit, and the two went tumbling both letting out excited squeaks.

"Ok, that's enough you two," Snakeeyes said.

Yewkit disentangled himself, but Lizardkit still tried to grapple his brother.

"Mom said we have to stop," Yewkit said, giving Lizardkit a slight push away.

Lizardkit settled down at his brother's words, turning to lick down a piece of ruffled fur on his side.

"Lizardkit," Clearstream said. "Can you tell me the names of your bother and sister?"

Lizardkit didn't look up from grooming his side. Frostpaw noticed Lizardkit's siblings began to shift uneasily as the moments stretched on and on, and all the while Clearstream's gaze continued to be locked on Lizardkit, and he continued to remain seemingly oblivious to her question. It looked like that while a few moments before, the kits had just been excited to meet Clearstream, a new cat, now they seemed to sense that she was here for a reason, and that something might be wrong.

"Why does that matter?" Yewkit finally piped up.

"Yeah, he knows who we are!" Featherkit chimed in.

Featherkit flicked her tail at Lizardkit, and he snapped his head up from grooming his side, blinking curiously at his sister.

"Right, Lizardkit?" Featherkit squeaked. "You know who we are!"

Featherkit flicked her tail at herself and at Yewkit as she spoke. Lizardkit let out a quiet *"mrrow!"* and padded over to them, giving both of his siblings an affectionate bunts with his head before flopping on the ground next to them and picking his grooming back up.

"Of course he does," Clearstream spoke reassuringly to the kits, but Frostpaw noticed a shadow of sadness creeping into her gaze.

Snakeeyes was gazing at Clearstream in concern. Clearstream inclined her head, indicating for Snakeeyes to lean closer to her. Frostpaw's ears pricked to listen in.

"I'm sorry, Snakeeyes," Clearstream murmured in a quiet voice so the kits could not overhear. "I'm afraid that Lizardkit appears to be deaf."

Frostpaw's eyes went wide with surprise.

Deaf?

"No... He can't..." Snakeeyes said, her mismatched eyes wide.

Frostpaw could see a battle waging in them, between fierce denial that anything could be wrong with her kit, and the obvious truth that was staring her right in her face.

"This is my fault," she growled.

Snakeeyes crumpled over like she had been struck by a physical blow. Clearstream wrapped her fluffy grey-striped tail supportively around the queen as Snakeeyes buried her face in her paws. Frostpaw felt her heart sinking down to her stomach.

"What's wrong?" Featherkit demanded, gazing at her pained mother

with eyes wide with fear. "What's wrong with Snakeeyes? What does 'deaf' mean?"

The three kits had grown greatly concerned at Snakeeyes' sudden collapse, and they clustered tightly together, their small, fluffy faces each furrowed with confusion and fear.

Clearstream sighed quietly, evidently wishing that the kits had not overheard her. Frostpaw's heart twisted in sympathy as she looked at the little kits' frightened faces.

"It's okay," Clearstream soothed. "Deaf just means... well you know how you can hear with your ears what I'm saying right now? Well... Lizardkit can't do that. He just sees my mouth move with his eyes, but he doesn't hear any sounds from it. It's like his ears are stuffed with so much moss no noise can get through."

"Then we can just take the moss out," Yewkit protested, pressing himself closer to his brother so his silver fur mingled with Lizardkit's white pelt.

"No..." Clearstream sighed again, shaking her head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple, little one. There is no real moss in his ears. They just don't work."

Featherkit's and Yewkit's brows furrowed as her words sunk in. Lizardkit looked back and forth from his siblings to his mother, his face still creased with confusion as he appeared to try to decipher why exactly everyone was so upset. Lizardkit broke away from his siblings, padding up to Snakeeyes and gently nudging her head with his muzzle. Snakeeyes lifted her head with a shaky breath, and Lizardkit rasped his tongue across her cheek, burrowing himself comfortingly against her. Snakeeyes let out a quiet whine and wrapped her forepaws around Lizardkit, pulling him close to her chest. Snakeeyes pressed her face into her kit.

"I'm so sorry, Lizardkit, this is my fault," she repeated.

"You couldn't have known..." Clearstream murmured to her, but Snakeeyes just shook her head fiercely at her words.

"I can't hear out of one ear," Snakeeyes said, spitting the admission out venomously as she locked Clearstream in her mismatched gaze. "But, I never thought one of my kits..."

Snakeeyes' voice lost its anger as she choked up, and she seemed to deflate.

"Snakeeyes!" Rowanheart's voice echoed across camp.

The ginger tom came running up to his mate, his gaze flickering between her curled up form on the ground, the kits, and Clearstream.

"What's wrong? Is someone hurt?" he demanded, his gaze flying to Clearstream.

"No," Snakeeyes murmured, drawing his attention back to her. "It's... Lizardkit is deaf."

Rowanheart's brow furrowed, and his gaze flickered to Lizardkit.

"What? But, he..." Rowanheart started to protest before his voice trailed off as the words sunk in.

Frostpaw saw his gaze darken as he realized that it was a reasonable explanation for his kit's behavior. Snakeeyes growled softly, screwing her eyes shut in pain. Frostpaw stomach clenched to see Snakeeyes so torn up. Frostpaw had always admired her as an amazingly fierce and strong warrior. She would have to be, to be able to deal with Swoopstrike as her littermate, and to fight back against others that judged her on her strange, odd-eyed appearance. Now though, Frostpaw couldn't help but feel like she was intruding, seeing the queen so pained and vulnerable. She felt like she shouldn't be here, involved in this private moment with Snakeeyes, Rowanheart and their kits. But, since Frostpaw was already stuck here in the middle of it, she also felt like she couldn't *not* say something to try to help Snakeeyes—not when the queen had been so kind to her in the past when she needed it.

"It's okay," Frostpaw murmured hesitantly. "Lizardkit will still be able to hunt. You've seen him chase after that moss-ball! And, I saw

that he's always the first to scent anyone coming too! Before anyone else can even hear them."

Snakeeyes gaze flickered back open, and she turned to look at Frostpaw. Frostpaw saw hope begin to glimmer there.

"You're right. He's quick and clever. He understands gestures and signs," Snakeeyes said her words spilling out more and more rapidly as she regained hope. "I bet I could teach him more. With enough, we would practically be able to talk to him."

"He already taught me one!" Frostpaw said with a soft purr.

She swatted her paw across the ground like she was hitting an invisible piece of moss.

"That means 'Hit the moss-ball, frog-brain!'" Frostpaw said.

Snakeeyes pushed herself into a sitting position, her eyes gleaming as life seemed to surge back into her. She turned to looked down at Lizardkit, who was peering up at her curiously, noticing the sudden change in her demeanor. Snakeeyes made eye contact with him for a moment, before deliberately swatting her paw across the ground, making the "hitting the moss-ball" gesture. Lizardkit's ears pricked in interest. After a moment of hesitation, he started to pad away from her, over to where the moss-ball had been abandoned a few tail-lengths away. After he took a few steps, he looked at Snakeeyes back over his shoulder, as if to confirm. Snakeeyes nodded at him, purring encouragingly. Lizardkit's blue eyes lit up, and he dashed the remaining distance to the moss-ball, snatching it up and running over to Snakeeyes with it, dropping it on the ground in front of her. Snakeeyes sent the moss-ball flying with a powerful hit, and Lizardkit took off after it with his siblings dashing off after him close behind. The kits' distress seemed to be forgotten, at least for now.

Snakeeyes watched them run with eyes that shone with pride, but Frostpaw noticed that Rowanheart looked much more uneasy.

"Will Lizardkit ever be a full warrior though?" Rowanheart mumbled when the kits had run out of ear-shot.

"Of course," Snakeeyes hissed at him, whipping her head around to lock her mate in a searing blue-and-green gaze. "He will be whatever he wants to be."

Rowanheart's ears flattened, and he didn't protest his mate again, although Frostpaw noticed him and Clearstream exchange a worried look.

Frostpaw lightly cleared her throat.

"Um, I better get going," she said. "Sun-high has past, and Swoopstrike will have have my tail if I'm late for training."

"Tell Swoopstrike that if he tries to take your tail, I'll take his whole pelt," Snakeeyes quipped lightly, but her gaze was soft when she looked at Frostpaw. "Thank you for your help today, Frostpaw."

Frostpaw dipped her head to the pair of warriors and the medicine cat and made a quick departure. But, as Frostpaw pushed her way out of camp and padded off in the direction of the Burnt Sycamore, she couldn't help but think about little Lizardkit. Frostpaw sighed quietly. She sensed that his journey to be a warrior would be more difficult than even hers.

Night-stalking

Frostpaw blinked awake in the apprentices' den in her nest beside Autumnpaw's at the sound of what she thought was light footfalls from outside the den. Frostpaw peered into the darkness inside the den, trying to see out into the camp through the narrow entrance of the holly bush. All seemed still and quiet; the other apprentices in the den were curled up and sleeping soundly. But, the fur on Frostpaw's shoulders rose. She had a nagging sense something wasn't right. She felt like she was being watched.

Frostpaw prodded Autumnpaw's flank with her hind-leg, her ears pricked, still tensely scanning the den with her gaze.

"Huh, wha—?" Autumnpaw mumbled, stirring, his eyes blearily blinking open.

"Shh!" Frostpaw hissed at him, flicking her ears to indicate the area around them.

"I think something is wrong," she breathed in a barely audible voice. *"I heard paw-steps close to the den."*

Autumnpaw's ears pricked and his gaze flickered warily from side to side.

"I don't hear anything," he whispered back. *"It was probably just someone going to the dirt-place."*

Frostpaw clenched her jaw.

"I'm going to go look," she muttered.

Frostpaw slowly rose to her paws. Despite Autumnpaw's reassurance that it was nothing, he watched Frostpaw with a wide, worried gaze as she crept over to the entrance of the den. Frostpaw slunk outside, sticking close to the shadows cast by the holly bush as she tensely crouched. Her gaze scanned the clearing. It was a

moonless night, so the camp was cast in darkness, illuminated only by the glimmer of a few stars above. Everything seemed quiet and normal. No fear-scent or blood tinged the air, only the comforting ever-present scent of ShadowClan was on the breeze. She didn't hear any movement, and she could see there were no enemy warriors swarming in the shadows.

Frostpaw breathed a soft sigh of relief. Autumnpaw was right. It was nothing.

As Frostpaw started to take a step back into the den, she felt the fur on her back stir in a breeze, then in the next heartbeat, she had been tackled into the ground, rolled away from the den.

"Frost—!" she heard Autumnpaw start to cry as he saw her pounced on, but then he was abruptly silenced.

Frostpaw felt a heavy weight on her back, pinning her to the ground, and a paw pressed to the back of her head as her muzzle was shoved into the damp earth to keep her from yowling out.

Frostpaw's heart hammered in fear as she buckled under her attacker, twisting and writhing to try to escape his paws. Frostpaw surged upwards wildly and was surprised to feel the grip holding her down suddenly vanish, allowing her to spring unencumbered to her feet. Frostpaw whipped around to face her attacker, tail lashing, her teeth bared...

"Swoopstrike!" Frostpaw hissed, finally recognizing her mentor.

Frostpaw could barely make out Swoopstrike's expression in the darkness, but she could see that his green eyes gleamed with mischievous amusement.

"Finally recognize me, huh? Took you long enough," he said, licking a paw to smugly drag it over his whiskers.

"Why did you do that?" Frostpaw spat, digging her claws into the ground.

Normally she wouldn't dare speak to Swoopstrike so aggressively, but right now she couldn't help it; her blood still felt hot in her

veins, ready to fight, and her heart was still racing in her chest.

"I'll explain in a moment," he said, twitching his ears. "But, first, let's go rescue your incompetent den-mates."

Swoopstrike flicked his tail towards the entrance of the apprentice's den, indicating for Frostpaw to go first. Frostpaw's brow furrowed, but she obeyed, cautiously creeping around Swoopstrike, keeping a half an eye on him to make sure he wasn't going to attack her for a second time.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to pounce on you again," Swoopstrike said, his voice rough with amusement. "At least... not right now."

Frostpaw huffed offendedly and scampered the rest of the way around him, pushing back inside the holly bush. Frostpaw's eyes widened in surprise at the sight that greeted her there. The den was crowded with bodies— every apprentice had been pinned to their nest by their mentors. Even Grovepelt, the deputy, was there, standing over Pinepaw, who's tail twitched mutinously from her position trapped beneath his paws. Swoopstrike squeezed inside next to Frostpaw. As he brushed past her, a wave of toadstool scent washed over her. Swoopstrike raked his critical gaze over the apprentices in their nests.

"Attacks can come at anytime!" Swoopstrike meowed. "As ShadowClan warriors, we must always be prepared! But, none of you were. Only Frostpaw had the whisker of sense to wake up and try to investigate, but she still didn't detect the threat!"

"Yeah, well maybe we didn't consider that our *trusted* mentors attacking us in our sleep could be a threat," Poolpaw muttered sourly, shooting a glance with narrowed eyes at Fogfur.

"We could have been any Clan's warriors," Grovepelt cut in. "You wouldn't have been able to tell by smell alone that we were your mentors since we disguised our scents. You think the other clans aren't clever enough to do that as well during an ambush?"

No apprentice argued with him, although Frostpaw thought Poolpaw still looked annoyed about his sleep being interrupted.

"You all must heighten your senses," Dappledpelt meowed from on top of Mosspaw. "So, even in a moonless night as dark as this one, you will be able to tell that an attack is coming."

"And, ShadowClan must not only be able to detect threats in the dark, but to fight in the dark as naturally as in the light," Thornheart said from next to Murmurpaw at the back of the den.

"Tonight we will train you to do that," Beeclaw added, looking down at Autumnpaw.

Autumnpaw's gaze flickered over to Frostpaw and their eyes met.

"Sorry," he mouthed to her from under Beeclaw's paws, apologizing for not believing her warning.

Frostpaw's whiskers twitched in amusement at the sight of his rumpled fur, and she just shrugged, indicating all was forgiven.

"Take a moment to compose yourselves, then meet us at the Burnt Sycamore," Fogfur rumbled. "We will train there until dawn."

"That is, as long as you all make it to the Burnt Sycamore..." Swoopstrike said, his tail twitching mischievously. "Be wary of the things that lurk in the darkness of the woods."

Then as quickly as the mentors appeared, they were gone, wiggling out from under the holly bush and streaming away from the apprentices' den. Frostpaw followed Swoopstrike out the den's entrance and watched as his tail vanished through the bramble-lined tunnel, heading outside the camp. After he had gone, Frostpaw turned back around and slipped back into the apprentice den.

Everyone was now out of their nests. Pinepaw was shaking moss out of her dark fur, and Murmurpaw was rhythmically licking her side, trying to flatten her nervously pricking pelt. Autumnpaw padded up to Frostpaw, his eyes bright.

"Okay, you were right. We were under attack," he meowed to her with a purr.

"I told you," Frostpaw said with a flick of her tail.

"Well since you know everything," Autumnpaw said teasingly. "What do we do now?"

"Swoopstrike said that there will be things in the woods," Murmurpaw said, her voice wavering slightly, her eyes as wide as an owl's.

"Our mentors will probably be watching us as we head to the Burnt Sycamore," Frostpaw explained. "Waiting to ambush us again if they get the chance."

"Yeah, there won't be any real enemies," Autumnpaw added, blinking reassuringly at the younger apprentice.

"Swoopstrike sounded so gleeful when he said that, though, the snake-heart," Poolpaw grumbled. "I bet jumping on us from the shadows will be the best part of this whole season for him."

Pinepaw shoved past all of the other apprentices and pushed her way out of the den without a word.

"Hey, where are you going?" Autumnpaw called after her.

"To the Burnt Sycamore. Obviously, frog-brain," she said over her shoulder with an eye-roll. "We haven't got all night to stand here and talk about it."

"Yeah, but we should go together," Autumnpaw argued, padding out of the den after her. "Our chances against them are better if we are in a group. More ears and eyes to be on the lookout."

Pinepaw huffed.

"Fine," she said.

"You all ready?" Autumnpaw asked, turning to peer back into the apprentices' den.

"Yeah," Frostpaw said, following him out, Poolpaw, Murmurpaw, and Mosspaw close behind her.

The group made their way to the bramble barrier, and one by one slipped out of camp. The forest outside was deeply shadowed. The faintest hint of the indigo sky peeked down through the thick canopy of pine branches above. The trees themselves were only shades of grey and black, and they all blended together in a tangled net of wood in every direction Frostpaw looked.

The apprentices trekked through the forest in the direction of the Burnt Sycamore in a tight formation, each casting wary glances over their shoulders every so often to make sure that there was no one behind them.

"This feels so weird," Autumnpaw murmured, breaking the silence of the group. "Normally apprentices aren't allowed out alone without our mentors."

"We aren't without them though," Frostpaw whispered back. "You know they must be close by..."

Murmurpaw shivered at her words, shooting nervous glances from side to side.

"Ugh, I can't believe they're making us do this," Poolpaw grumbled, narrowing his eyes in annoyance.

"I don't know," Mosspaw chimed in, giving a small bounce of excitement. "I think it's kind of fun."

"Well, you weren't pounced on by Fogfur," Poolpaw said with a wince. "He's the biggest of all the mentors! I'll be sore for a week!"

"Well you're the biggest of all of us," Autumnpaw pointed out. "So, if anyone could take it..."

"Shh!" Pinepaw said, whipping around to hiss at them. "You all are chattering like starlings! Do you *want* to give away our position?"

Silence fell back over the group. Frostpaw pricked her ears, hoping to catch any sound of their mentors, but besides the hooting of an owl, the forest was totally silent around them.

After they had walked for a while longer, Autumnpaw broke the

quiet again by clearing his throat. Pinepaw shot him a scorching look, but Autumnpaw began to speak regardless.

"Look," he whispered. "I get that we need to be quiet, but we also need a plan. What are we supposed to be doing out here?"

"Get to the Burnt Sycamore," Pinepaw hissed back in a hushed voice. "Without being caught again. It's an assessment of our senses and night-stalking skills."

"Obviously," Autumnpaw whispered with an eye-roll, one ear twitching back in annoyance. "But, how exactly are we supposed to do that? As is, no way we will make it through the woods without them catching us. They could be watching us right now, shaking their heads at us just bumbling along!"

"We should take turns being look-outs," Frostpaw whispered. "Some of us can concentrate on listening and scenting for our mentors while others are in charge of navigating, leading the group to the tree."

Pinepaw nodded thoughtfully, her amber eyes lighting up as a plan began to form in her mind.

"Let's fan out and put look-outs at each point," Pinepaw whispered. "Mosspaw, you take the rear. Poolpaw, the left. Autumnpaw the right. Murmurpaw, Frostpaw and I will navigate from the middle. But, look-outs shouldn't go too far, we should still be able to see each other, so we can signal if anyone notices anything out of the ordinary. The signal will be to raise your tail straight up if you think something is off."

"We should disguise our scents too," Frostpaw whispered. "Like our mentors did."

Frostpaw eyed her pale-colored pelt. Her creamy-white fur seemed to glow faintly in the weak star-light.

"And, maybe I'll roll in some mud," Frostpaw said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Frostpaw noticed Pinepaw's nose wrinkle up in disgust at her suggestion, and Frostpaw winced

slightly as her mind flashed back to Pinepaw's cruel kit-hood nickname for her— Dirtface.

I wonder if she'll call me that... I mean I did just volunteer to roll in mud.

But, if the dark-furred apprentice's thoughts followed the same path through her memory as Frostpaw's, she hid it well.

"Good idea," Pinepaw murmured. "Why don't we all roll in mud? It'll disguise our scents as well as hiding our fur colors. Murmurpaw is a fairly pale golden too. And, Poolpaw has some big white-patches."

Pinepaw signaled for the group to follow her, and she led them to a mud puddle gathered at the roots of a nearby pine.

Autumnpaw gazed down at the mud, his brow furrowing.

"But, your fur and mine is already dark enough that we don't have to," he complained to Pinepaw. "I'll be grooming mud out of my fur for a moon if I roll in that!"

"Too bad. It'll disguise our scents, so we're all doing it," Pinepaw whispered, narrowing her eyes at her brother. "I'm leading this group, and I said so."

"What?" Poolpaw chimed in incredulously. "You're the leader?"

"Yeah! We never decided on that," Autumnpaw argued.

"Well if it wasn't for me, you all would still be milling aimlessly around in the apprentices' den!" Pinepaw hissed.

"Well Frostpaw is the one with all the good ideas!" Autumnpaw growled. "And, she was the only one that noticed our mentors outside our den. So, maybe she should lead!"

All the apprentice's turned to gaze at Frostpaw. She felt heat rush to her ears at their sudden undivided attention, and her stomach swirled like moths were trapped inside it. She shook her head quickly, staring intently at the ground.

"No. I think Pinepaw is right," she said. "She should be in charge."

Frostpaw's gaze flickered up from the ground, and she saw Pinepaw raise her chin proudly.

"That's settled then. Come on," Pinepaw said.

Despite the disgusted expression she made when Frostpaw first suggested rolling in mud, Pinepaw led the way and measuredly walked into the mud puddle, her face neutral as she began to coat her pelt with it. Frostpaw followed her into the puddle, shivering as the slimy mud splashed up her legs, dragging down at her long fur. Frostpaw crouched down to let it soak into her belly and side fur, steeling herself for a moment before quickly rolling to get it on her back.

"Yuck," Frostpaw muttered as she stood up, feeling the slimy excess mud sliding down her sides.

She padded out of the puddle, her paws squelching at every step as she walked through the mud then back onto solid ground. Everyone else was still coating their fur with mud besides Autumnpaw, who was standing at the edge of the puddle with an uncertain look on his face.

"Your turn," Frostpaw whispered to him, nodding at the mud puddle.

"Please... do I have to?" Autumnpaw whispered back, his expression pleading. "It looks awful. My pelt is so thick, the mud will soak through it all! I mean, look at your fur! No offense, but you look like some sort of mud-monster-cat."

Frostpaw purred, a mischievous feeling creeping over her.

"Well you have two heartbeats to get into that puddle, before this mud-monster-cat makes you," Frostpaw said, giving a playful growl.

Autumnpaw's eyes shimmered playfully, and he made his gaze go wide.

"Please, oh great mud-monster, don't trap me in your slimy, mud

territory! Have mercy; let me go free," he said.

"Time's up!" Frostpaw growled, giving Autumnpaw a heavy shove.

He stumbled forward a few steps into the puddle, the mud splashing up his legs and his sides.

"Ugh!" he grumbled, peering down at his muddy pelt in dismay.

"Stop playing around, frog-brain," Pinepaw whispered to Autumnpaw, her tail twitching. "Coat your pelt quickly, and let's keep going!"

Autumnpaw grudgingly obeyed her, and then the gang of apprentices was off again, slipping into their designated positions, leaving Frostpaw and Murmurpaw alone in the middle of the patrol with Pinepaw. Frostpaw matched Pinepaw stride for stride, while Murmurpaw stuck close to Frostpaw's side, her eyes wide as they crept through the dark trees. Another owl hooted in the distance, and Murmurpaw pressed herself even closer into Frostpaw's fur, her gaze flittering around the pine tree branches above them worriedly. Frostpaw flicked her tail reassuringly against the younger apprentice's side, although the number of owls out tonight worried Frostpaw a bit as well. She knew that owls would go after kits, but surely the predatory birds wouldn't try attacking such a large patrol of apprentices, right?

They walked undisturbed for a while, and Frostpaw began to cautiously hope that maybe they would be able to sneak past their mentors and make it to the Burnt Sycamore safely after all. But, then she saw Autumnpaw's tail go up in alarm. Pinepaw signaled for the group to halt, and everyone cautiously scented the air. Frostpaw drew a deep breath of the thick, humid air over her tongue slowly.

"I don't smell anything," Pinepaw said in a voice barely above a breath to Autumnpaw.

"I heard weird rustling," Autumnpaw whispered back.

Everyone stilled again, attempting to discern anything unusual.

Frostpaw closed her eyes to block out visual distractions— she knew their mentors wouldn't be so careless to have themselves be easily seen anyway. Frostpaw imagined stretching out her hearing and her scenting as far as it could reach, like she was probing the woods around her with them.

With her ears, she could make out a hooting owl in the distance, and another hooting much more closely, in a nearby tree, as if in response. She could hear the wind softly sighing through the pine needles above her, and a few frogs croaking in a marsh. Sensing nothing out of the ordinary, she shifted her focus to her nose. She scented mud most strongly, but she knew that was only because it completely coated her and her den-mates' pelts. Frostpaw pushed that aside and searched deeper, teasing apart the scents of the forest around her. She smelt musty peat moss and the sour-tinged scent of bog. She smelt crisp, cool pine needles, and the nutty scent of a squirrel that passed by here not that long ago. She smelt toadstools and damp ferns... Frostpaw returned to the toadstool scent, remembering that it was what their mentors had disguised their scent with when they ambushed them at the den. Frostpaw rolled the scent over her tongue thoughtfully.

How am I supposed to tell the difference between real toadstools and our mentors?

Frostpaw honed in on the toadstool scent, trying to figure out where it was coming from. She lifted her nose to point it into the breeze, sniffing as she attempted to pinpoint it's location.

The toadstools are... above us? She thought in confusion.

Frostpaw's eyes snapped open, her shoulders tensing as she understood.

"They're in the trees!" Frostpaw hissed the warning.

Everyone crouched down, eyes flying upwards. Frostpaw heard another owl hoot, then in a nearby tree, she watched the owl's shadow move farther down a branch. Frostpaw narrowed her eyes, looking closer... not an owl's shadow... a cat's!

"Run!" Pinepaw barked the order.

The group took off, barreling through the dark forest.

"Can you see any of them?" Mosspaw asked, her eyes flying wildly around as she tried to pick out anything in the branches above them.

"I think there's one behind us!" Murmurpaw exclaimed. "They're jumping from branch to branch!"

"What?!" Poolpaw meowed in shock.

Frostpaw risked a glance behind her, and sure enough, caught a shadow of movement flashing through the branches of the trees.

"They're no SkyClan though. We'll be much faster than them on foot than they will be in the trees!" Pinepaw panted. "We should be able to make it to the Burnt Sycamore without them catching us!"

Frostpaw heard more hooting someways in front of her, and her ears pricked in alarm.

"I think they're communicating with hoots!" Frostpaw hissed in a low voice that carried only to her den-mates' ears. "And, I think they are spread out. They may still be able to surround us!"

"Snake-dung," Pinepaw swore, correcting their direction so they weren't running right at the noise anymore, but now they also weren't pointed straight at the Burnt Sycamore.

"I think we may need to split up and rendezvous at the Burnt Sycamore," Pinepaw said, her brow furrowing.

"We'll be weaker alone!" Autumnpaw protested through his panting.

"True, but they'll surround us if we keep going as a group, and as long as we can make sure they don't catch us, we don't have to worry about being weaker separately," Pinepaw said. "And, we already made it over half-way there. We don't have much further to go."

"We'll be harder to find and track alone too," Poolpaw added.

"So it's agreed," Pinepaw panted. "Ready? Split!"

Frostpaw turned hard to the right, whipping her tail around to keep her balance as she sprinted away from her den-mates. She turned to look over her shoulder, and she watched their group split like seeds from a dandelion, being blown in all different directions by the wind. Frostpaw saw their pelts flickering through the trees only for a moment, before the dark mud-stained colors vanished, blending into the rest of the dark forest. Frostpaw turned her attention back forward. She had to get to the Burnt Sycamore alone now. And, she had to do it fast before their mentors could catch her. Or, her only other option was to somehow ensure she ditched any cats tracking her from the trees, and then snuck to the Sycamore without them finding her.

Frostpaw's mind flew as fast as her paws as she tried to come up with a plan. If a cat had eyes on her right now, she would be at a disadvantage. But, judging by the amount of hooting Frostpaw remembered hearing coming from other parts of the forest, she was sure that there could have only been one or two cats directly tracking the group, three at the most, and the rest were scattered throughout the forest and were getting updates on their location via hoots. And, when the apprentice group spilt up, the odds were in her favor that the cats that were tracking them decided to go after one of the other members of the group, and not her.

So, the first thing I need to do is to see if I'm being followed.

She couldn't tell by the hoots. After the apprentices split up, the hooting had gone silent, probably because their mentors that were tracking them were too busy bounding through the branches to update their position. Frostpaw couldn't smell any toadstools, coming from above her at least, but she felt like to be sure that she wasn't being tracked, she would have to check visually if she could see any shadows moving through the branches. Frostpaw whipped around the trunk of a thick pine tree and came to a screeching stop, crouching down low in the shadows of the roots. She hoped that if there had been a cat following her, they would have been looking away at that moment, distracted by leaping from branch to branch,

and when they looked back, it would have appeared as if she had simply vanished into the forest.

After a cautious hesitation, Frostpaw peeked around from the edge of the trunk, keeping her ears flat to disguise her silhouette and creeping her face around the tree as slowly as possible to not draw attention to her movement. Her gaze flickered through the dark tree-tops around her. The branches of the pines seemed to be still grey tendrils against a black star-studded sky, but Frostpaw had learned enough of ShadowClan ways to know that things weren't always how they appeared. If someone had been following her, she would have to out-wait them, in case they were doing the same thing as her right now—crouching hidden and still, searching for any sign of movement.

Frostpaw felt like she stayed crouched at the roots of that pine tree forever. Her muscles started to stiffen up from going so suddenly from running to motionless. She waited until she couldn't wait any longer... and she saw no movement in the trees around her.

Okay... no one is here. But, I still have to get to the Burnt Sycamore without them finding me.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed. It would be difficult trying to avoid them the whole journey, but if luck was on her side, and the mentors were busy looking for everyone else... she hoped she would be able do it. Frostpaw gazed out in the direction that she knew led to the Burnt Sycamore, sighing softly to herself as she prepared to head out. But, then her gaze flickered back upwards towards the branches, and an idea struck her like a lightning bolt, causing all her fur to stand on end.

I could travel in the trees! It would be the best place to hide— in plain sight! The mentors won't be able to recognize me unless they get super close because it's so dark, and my pelt is covered in mud, disguising my color and my scent!

The idea seemed so clever, but so obvious at the same time, that Frostpaw hesitated for a moment, doubting if it could really be so easy. But, when she could think of no glaring flaws in the plan, she quickly sprung into motion.

Frostpaw easily clawed her way up the pine tree that she had been hiding behind, making it to one of its sturdy lower branches. She turned to face in the direction of the Burnt Sycamore, cautiously eyeing the distance between the end of the branch of the tree she was in, and the closest branches on the next one. Luckily, in this part of ShadowClan territory, the pine forest was thick, and the trees grew in dense groves. It would be impossible to perform this same trick of leaping from tree to tree in the marshier parts of the territory, where the trees grew more spread out.

Frostpaw took a deep breath, steading herself. She sensed that she would have to run out to the end of the branch, and leap the few tail-lengths into the branch in the next tree in one fluid motion like she saw squirrels do. The ends of the branches seemed too thin and like they would sway too much under her weight for her to hesitate on them before jumping.

Frostpaw's stomach clenched in nervousness as she had one worried thought about falling, but she did her best to push the thought away.

I've jumped a lot farther than this on the ground all of the time! It can't be that hard.

Frostpaw took another deep breath, feeling the heavy air settle reassuringly into her lungs, calming her.

Here I go!

Frostpaw bounded forward, the limb swaying slightly under her paws as she ran, but she felt her muscles naturally making almost imperceptible corrections to keep her feet firmly on the branch. As the branch thinned and tapered, the swaying beneath her became more dramatic, and Frostpaw felt an instinctual certainty in some deep part of her mind, that it was time for her to leap. Frostpaw's hind-legs bunched under her, and she sprang, sailing easily from the one tree into the next. Frostpaw dug unsheathed claws into the branch of the next tree for better grip, but didn't try to fight the momentum of her leap forward, instead she harnessed it, using it to continue to run down the branch, heading towards the trunk of the pine.

I did it!

A thrill of excitement ran through Frostpaw's chest. Not only did she do it; it felt so strangely easy. Nothing else she tried in training had come this naturally to her before.

I bet if Dampfang tried this, he'd fall flat on his face.

Frostpaw sprung again into a neighboring branch, a feeling of confidence growing inside her at the capability of her paws. Before long, she was springing from branch to branch, tree to tree, as easily as a squirrel, making quick time through the forest towards the Burnt Sycamore.

Frostpaw could tell she was growing closer, and that she would be at the clearing that surrounded the Burnt Sycamore soon. Frostpaw felt a rush of excitement at that thought, but then her attention snapped to the rustling of some pine needles on a different tree. She slowed, coming to a stop on the branch that she was on; her gaze searched the shadowed tree intently for the source of noise. A shadow slipped down the length of a branch. It was very cat-like, much too large to be a squirrel. As the cat came to a stop, Frostpaw could just make out the outline of the cat's head in the darkness. Its ears were pricked in her direction. It had definitely noticed her. Frostpaw tried to swallow, but her mouth was suddenly dry.

I can't let whoever it is get too close. Then they will know that I'm not one of the mentors! But, what do I do?

Frostpaw's mind whirled rapidly as she tried to come up with a behavior that the other cat wouldn't find suspicious. Frostpaw gave a slow wave of her tail to the other cat.

"*Whoo-who,"* Frostpaw said in a low voice, doing her very best owl imitation.

She saw the other cat's head nod.

"Whoo-who," the other cat hooted back.

It turned and started bounding off, away from Frostpaw. Frostpaw heaved a sigh of relief, standing in place for a moment longer,

before she continued her journey towards the Burnt Sycamore. As she bounded along a few branches, the nervousness and relief that she had felt during the encounter with the other cat faded away to be replaced by a feeling of warm satisfaction in her chest. She almost couldn't believe it. She had fooled the mentor!

Frostpaw could see the Burnt Sycamore's stunted and twisted form through the tree branches. Frostpaw narrowed her eyes, trying to peer down at the area around the tree's roots through the tangled mess of pine needles and branches. She could see a few dark cat forms milling around there, but whether they were mentors or apprentices that had made it, she couldn't tell.

I'm so close! I just have to make it to the tree.

Frostpaw leapt along the few branches left until she reached the tree on the edge of the clearing that surrounded the Burnt Sycamore. The heads of the three cats sitting by the roots of the Burnt Sycamore turned towards the sound of her rustling. Frostpaw scampered down the tree head-first like a squirrel, moving as quickly as she could without losing her grip on the somewhat slick bark with her claws and falling flat on her face. Frostpaw hit the ground with all four paws and then sprinted towards the base of the Burnt Sycamore.

"Snake-dung!" A voice hissed from somewhere behind her, followed by violent rustling.

Frostpaw panted, her paws flying across the ground as she heard the sound of a cat scrambling down a tree and chasing her. But, whoever it was, was too late. Frostpaw slapped her fore-paws against one of the gnarled roots of the Burnt Sycamore, springing on top of it to whirl around victoriously and face her pursuer.

"I made it!" Frostpaw declared, her eyes gleaming.

Swoopstrike had slowed to a trot as he approached her, panting and shaking his head.

"Snake-dung, I can't believe you got past me!" he grumbled, but Frostpaw thought she could maybe almost detect a hint of pride in

his voice. "I should've known it was *you* in the tree!"

Frostpaw's brow furrowed, and for a moment, she wondered what she had done to make Swoopstrike suspicious it was her. She opened her mouth to ask, but before she could, the other cats already at the tree padded over. Frostpaw turned her head to see Grovepelt, Pinepaw and Murmurpaw approaching.

"Well done, Frostpaw," Grovepelt said with a purr. "Pinepaw and Murmurpaw also arrived together successfully at the Burnt Sycamore."

Pinepaw raised her chin proudly, and although Murmurpaw scuffled her paws shyly, she also stood a bit straighter.

"It was clever of you to use the trees just like the mentors were doing to blend in with them to hide," Grovepelt continued to Frostpaw. "That kind of creative thinking is just what we were trying to encourage with this exercise. You have the makings of a very cunning battle tactician."

Frostpaw's tail raised happily at the deputy's praise. She shot a glance over at Swoopstrike and was delighted to see her mentor nodding along with him.

"Well, you may have gotten through, though, but there are still three apprentices hanging out in the woods," Swoopstrike added, his eyes gleaming as the thrill of the hunt settled back over him. "I'll make sure that they don't."

Swoopstrike turned and ran back into the trees, vanishing quickly from sight. Frostpaw glanced over at Grovepelt.

"Are you going to go back with him?" she asked.

Grovepelt purred.

"My old bones are too tired for that," he said good-naturedly. "Swoopstrike has a lot more energy than I do these days. I'll leave hunting down your den-mates to him."

Grovepelt's ears flickered.

"But, in the meanwhile, I'll teach you three night-stalking techniques that will allow you to disappear into the darkness like you are one with the shadows."

Grovepelt showed Frostpaw, Pinepaw, and Murmurpaw how to find the deepest shadows, the ones that were so inky black that not a whisker of light escaped them, and instructed them on how to keep their ears flat the whole time so that they didn't make silhouettes that enemies would identify immediately as cat-like. Grovepelt was in the middle of explaining how they needed to also keep their eyes slitted so they didn't give away their position from light reflecting in their eyes, when the sound of pounding paw-steps interrupted him. Everyone turned to look towards the sound, waiting to see who would emerge from the darkness.

What appeared to be a cat-like creature came running towards them, but Frostpaw's brow furrowed in confusion at the strange, spindly shapes that poked out of this creature's pelt in all directions. When the cat drew closer, a loud purr of amusement burst from Frostpaw's chest, and she could hear Pinepaw, Murmurpaw, and even Grovepelt laughing along with her. As the cat reached the Burnt Sycamore, Frostpaw could now tell that it was Autumnpaw. He was of course still coated in mud, just as Frostpaw, Pinepaw and Murmurpaw were, but on top of that his pelt now had a layer of leaves and twigs, which stuck out in all directions like he was some kind of strange porcupine.

"What happened to you not wanting to get stuff in your pelt?" Frostpaw asked through her purrs.

"You look like you got in a fight with a bush! And, the bush won!" Pinepaw exclaimed, almost breathless with laugher.

"Very funny," Autumnpaw said, twitching his tail, but he didn't look that upset. "I did it to camouflage myself, for your information. And, it worked, since I made it here didn't I?"

"Yes, well done," Grovepelt said with a nod. "I was just telling these three the importance of disguising the silhouette of your body during night-stalking. You embodied that lesson well."

Autumnpaw twitched his whiskers with a pleased expression. Frostpaw padded over to him.

"Do you want any help getting all these leaves and sticks out of your fur? Or are keeping them for mementos?" Frostpaw teased.

Autumnpaw flicked his ears.

"Ugh, yes please. My skin is itching like crazy!" Autumnpaw said.

Frostpaw began picking leaves and twigs from Autumnpaw's pelt.

"So, how did you guys make it here?" Autumnpaw asked the group.

Frostpaw explained how she had leapt from branch to branch in the trees like the mentors, while Pinepaw and Murmurpaw said how they had just ran together as fast as they could to the Burnt Sycamore, taking turns navigating and being on the lookout for pursuers.

"Sometimes the simplest plan is the fastest," Grovepelt said, nodding approvingly to Pinepaw and Murmurpaw.

"Hold on, though, I thought we all agreed to split up?" Autumnpaw said, sounding slightly accusatory. "Why did you two end up staying together?"

"Murmurpaw didn't want to be left alone," Pinepaw said, glaring at her brother.

Murmurpaw ducked her head, looking a bit ashamed.

"I don't know the forest that well yet, and things look different at night. I was afraid that I'd get lost," she muttered.

Frostpaw felt a flash of sympathy for the younger cat, but it was Pinepaw that turned to her.

"Hey, don't worry about it. Autumnpaw is just being a frog-brain," Pinepaw said to Murmurpaw, swiping her tail down Murmurpaw's side reassuringly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that," Autumnpaw muttered, scuffling his paws on the ground.

Their conversation was interrupted when the sound of cats talking made everyone's ears prick.

Rounding the Burnt Sycamore from the other side, was the rest of the cats in the patrol that had left camp, mentors and apprentices alike. Poolpaw and Mosspaw were in the center of the group, and Swoopstrike was leading them, his head held high.

"We caught some apprentices for you!" Swoopstrike said in a very unusually cheery voice, waving his tail at Grovepelt.

"Ugh!" Poolpaw exclaimed when he saw the other apprentices waiting by the Burnt Sycamore. "No wonder all of the mentors were after us! You all already made it here, so they didn't have anyone else to chase!"

"Well, then you should have been faster," Fogfur quipped in his deep voice, affectionately cuffing his apprentice over his ear.

"What was your plan?" Grovepelt asked Poolpaw and Mosspaw as the two groups joined, all settling down by the roots of the Burnt Sycamore.

"I was going to sneak around to the other side of the Burnt Sycamore and approach it from behind," Poolpaw said. "I thought there'd be less guards on the look out there."

"I had the same idea," Mosspaw said. "Poolpaw and I ran into each other on the far side, but that's when the mentors surrounded us."

Grovepelt nodded.

"Your plan was good; you are right that the less traveled path will have less guards. But, the execution needed work. Pinepaw and Murmurpaw ran here directly, yet they were able to make it by taking advantage of the chaos that happened when you all split up; not all the guards were at their correct post. But, because you two took a longer path, you took more time, which is where the mentors got the advantage," Grovepelt meowed.

Grovepelt settled down, sweeping his gaze over the whole group.

"Now that everyone is here, let's go over the lessons we learned tonight," he said.

Grovepelt's eyes flickered to the other mentors, waiting for one of them to chime in.

"Splitting up was a good idea," Thornheart meowed, beginning. "I was tracking the group when you did that, and it made it impossible for me to follow you all."

Grovepelt nodded.

"But, in a real battle, you never want to split up without a plan about when and where to rendezvous," Grovepelt said. "You all arrived at the Burnt Sycamore at different times. If instead of the Burnt Sycamore, this was an enemy camp, you would be fighting alone, not knowing when the rest of your patrol would arrive."

Grovepelt flicked his tail, indicating for the other mentors to continue.

"It was also smart of you all to disguise your scents and pelt colors with mud," Dappledpelt spoke up.

Grovepelt nodded, now turning his attention to the apprentices.

"Who can tell me what makes something a good thing to disguise your scent with?" he asked.

"It has to be strong enough to cover our own scents," Poolpaw said, his tail flicking behind him.

"Right," Grovepelt said. "But, strong smell itself isn't enough. If you rolled in fox-dung, you'd hide your scent rather thoroughly, but then you'd risk attracting cats to you, who came searching for a fox."

Grovepelt's gaze swept over the apprentices.

"What else?" he asked.

Frostpaw remembered the out-of-place toadstool scent that had tipped her off that a mentors was in the trees above her.

"It can't be anything unusual or out of place for the environment," Frostpaw spoke up in a soft voice. "I knew there was a mentor in the trees because I smelt toadstools above. But, toadstools don't grow on trees."

Grovepelt nodded.

"Well done," he said. "I was hoping that you all would notice that. And, you are right. If we were, for example, planning for a battle in the WindClan moor, where the ground is often dry, it might not be the best idea to disguise your scent with marsh mud."

Grovepelt glanced over at the mentors again.

"What else can the apprentices learn from this exercise?" he meowed.

"Frostpaw had the idea to disguise herself as a mentor by traveling through the trees," Swoopstrike said, adding in. "If we used that technique in a real battle, it would have been a very bold move because it would put us in the heart of the enemy, which would be disastrous if caught. But, if we were able to play the act convincingly enough, it would allow us to strike where our enemy was the most vulnerable."

Everyone nodded along.

"Autumnpaw also chose to disguise himself, but he did so to resemble the territory," Beeclaw said. "He took a lower risk approach than Frostpaw, which may be more appropriate depending on the style of battle."

"Good point, Beeclaw and Swoopstrike," Grovepelt said. "It is important to keep in mind that each battle is different. And, a technique that would work in one may not work in another. That is why we make sure to learn many different options, so we can always be prepared."

"Are we expecting any battles soon?" Murmurpaw piped up. "Since

the battle with WindClan, the forest has been peaceful right?"

One of Grovepelt's ears twitched back.

"That is true," the deputy rumbled. "And, it is green-leaf now, so Clans should be content with full bellies, but we can't expect any peace to last. It is not in a warrior's nature."

"And, not everyone is happy," Beeclaw chimed in. "Remember how ThunderClan and SkyClan were at the last gathering? If they aren't at each other's throats right now, they will be soon enough."

"Quite right," Grovepelt said with a nod to Beeclaw. "And, aggression is like fire, not like water. It doesn't flow downstream; it consumes in all directions. If ThunderClan and SkyClan go to war, we shouldn't relax, thinking that they will only fight each other. We must be wary of our own borders."

"But all of ThunderClan territory is between us and SkyClan," Mosspaw said, her ears flattening in confusion. "How can they be a threat to us?"

Grovepelt purred lightly.

"When you have seen as many seasons as I have, young 'paw, you will know that distance means nothing to a power-hungry cat," Grovepelt meowed.

Mosspaw's brow furrowed in concern, but Grovepelt was already rising to his paws.

"You've all done well tonight," he said, addressing the group of apprentices. "But, the sun's coming up now, so let's return to our dens. You all are welcome to sleep until sun-high, and then grab prey from the fresh-kill pile before reporting to your mentors."

Frostpaw tilted her head backwards. She was surprised to see that Grovepelt was right, and somehow, the whole night had already passed. Through the few branches of the Burnt Sycamore above her head, Frostpaw could see pale grey tendrils of fog snaking up from the canopies of the pines, forming silky silhouettes against the dark blue, but lightening, sky.

The first rays of the sun escaped over the horizon, turning the pine needles in the trees around her golden, and for one moment, Frostpaw thought that there must not be any part of all the territories that was as beautiful as ShadowClan's forest.

The rest of the patrol had already entered into the trees. Frostpaw rose to her paws, and padded quickly after them, heading back to camp.

The Marsh

In the hottest days of green-leaf, it rained for days and days, with no end in sight. It was early morning, and Frostpaw stood in the shelter of the holly bush that formed the apprentices' den, blinking miserably out at the pouring rain. The water had turned their whole territory into a swamp, the camp included. Rain had collected in massive pools in the center of the clearing in front of her, so to get to one side of the camp to the other, cats had to either skirt around the edges, or just trudge through knee-high mud and chest-high water. Luckily, the dens had been prudently formed on the higher ground around the edges of the camp, so none of them had been flooded by the rain.

But, as much as Frostpaw hated the rain and the mud, bafflingly, a lot of the warriors didn't seem to mind it. She had watched ShadowClan warriors slip unbothered through muddy water that came up to their shoulders like they were some sort of otter. Some even dived totally under the water, then emerged with frogs and salamanders clamped in their jaws. The territory itself too had seemed to come alive from the rain in a way that Frostpaw had never seen before. The fresh-kill pile was overflowing, and even right now, Frostpaw could hear the constant droning of cicadas, birds, and frogs in her ears, echoing from all parts of the territory down into camp.

A cool drop of water wiggled its way through the thickly netted holly branches above Frostpaw, and landed on the top of her head, running down to her nose. Frostpaw shook her head, sending the droplet flying. She didn't like how when she went out into the rain, her fur got so soaked and water-logged, making her motions feel heavy and cumbersome. Larkfoot had told her that she needed to eat more frogs to make her pelt sleek and water repellent, but Frostpaw thought that that advice might be an old nursery tale. Although, she had to admit, some warriors' pelts did seem to shed muddy water as easily as heron wings did... so Larkfoot's words might have a whisker of merit.

Frostpaw twitched her whiskers. She would have to pay closer attention to see how many frogs each of them ate.

Frostpaw's attention shifted to a flicker of movement from the warriors' den, underneath the dark, prickly bramble bush on the other side of camp. She saw the silver-and-black dappled form of Swoopstrike emerge. He didn't hesitate before stepping out into the rain, padding right to the pool at the center of camp and slipping into it. Frostpaw watched as he half-walked, half-swam across towards the apprentices' den, emerging with mud dripping from his belly, tail, and chin, turning the lower part of his body completely brown. His green eyes spotted Frostpaw sitting in the shelter of the holly bush easily.

"We're going on a hunting patrol," Swoopstrike said to her. "Get Pinepaw too. She's coming with us. Meet us by the bramble tunnel soon."

Frostpaw nodded, and Swoopstrike turned, heading to the fresh-kill pile to get himself some food before their patrol. Frostpaw watched him for a moment longer, seeing him pick up a frog to eat.

Frog. Huh.

Tail twitching thoughtfully, Frostpaw turned back into the den to wake Pinepaw.

Pinepaw and Murmurpaw were the only apprentices left sleeping in the cozy moss-lined den. Mosspaw, Poolpaw, and Autumnpaw were gone before Frostpaw had woken up, having already left for patrolling or training. Frostpaw padded over to Pinepaw and roused her by muttering her name.

The black-furred apprentice's amber eyes flickered open, and she twitched one ear at Frostpaw questioningly.

"We're on a hunting patrol," Frostpaw said. "Leaving soon."

Pinepaw yawned widely and nodded, sitting up in her nest. Frostpaw turned and padded back to the entrance of the den, leaving Pinepaw to give her pelt a quick grooming. Frostpaw

hesitated at the exit of the den for a moment before she forced herself out into the rain. As she padded towards the bramble tunnel that led out of camp, she tried her best to stick as close as possible to the edges of camp, where the ground wasn't swamped and where the tree branches stretching in from the surrounding forest were the most dense. But, still after only a few moments of walking, Frostpaw's fur was soaked through with water. Frostpaw sat down heavily by the bramble lined path with a sigh. Her skin was already completely wet, but at least it was hot outside, so she wasn't cold. In fact, she could *almost* convince herself that the cooling touch of the rain was nice on the muggy green-leaf day.

"Frostpaw," Grovepelt said in greeting, padding over to her with Marshnose, Dampfang and Kestrelmoon at his tail, whom Frostpaw presumed were the rest of their patrol.

Frostpaw twitched her whiskers in reply, sending water droplets flying. She gave a friendly nod at Kestrelmoon, but was careful to avoid eye contact with Dampfang and Marshnose. Although she could still hear Dampfang snort derisively when he saw that Frostpaw was on their patrol. Swoopstrike padded over quickly, having finished his meal. Despite the incessant rainfall, his belly was still brown; the mud not yet washed off.

"I'm here!" Pinepaw gasped, her paws squelching in mud as she bounded over to the group, her eyes wide with worry about being late.

"Alright then," Grovepelt meowed. "Then we are off."

Grovepelt led the patrol through the narrow path out of camp. The cats traveled in single file with Frostpaw the last in the line, walking right behind Swoopstrike's black striped tail. She was fine being last, though. Marshnose and Dampfang were the prickliest in the camp towards her, and they were only a few tail-lengths away! Frostpaw flicked her whiskers. She couldn't help but be a bit happy to have Swoopstrike as a buffer between her and them.

Her paws twitched, her mind drifting back towards the hunt. Maybe this patrol was a good chance to prove Marshnose and Dampfang wrong, though. If she caught a ton of prey, neither of them would

be able to say that she was a useless rogue that didn't provide for ShadowClan. Frostpaw raised her chin, setting her jaw determinedly.

With sure paws, Grovepelt wove through the waterlogged land, being sure to keep the group on the slightly firmer, higher ground. Frostpaw pricked her ears. She could hear Pinepaw meowing to Dampfang, but the older tom was responding mostly with grunts. Frostpaw twitched her tail. She didn't know what Pinepaw saw in that frog-brain. Although Frostpaw and Pinepaw didn't always get along, Frostpaw still knew that her den-mate deserved better than him.

As they walked, Frostpaw noticed that Grovepelt was headed straight towards the river that cut through the heart of ShadowClan territory. Frostpaw swallowed back a sigh. The territory surrounding the river was the marshiest area of ShadowClan land. And, they were hunting there on the rainiest day of the year!

Well I suppose it doesn't matter if we hunt in the pines or in the marsh. We're soaked through either way.

More sycamores than pines grew in this part of the territory. They cropped up slowly, but eventually they surrounded the patrol with huge mottled grey and brown trunks, some of them nearly as wide as the Burnt Sycamore's. Shaggy moss hung down from low branches, almost like the trees were coated in long green fur. Frostpaw could hear the croaks of frogs and the rushing sound of the stream ahead, much louder than normal because of the incessant rainfall. Frostpaw flinched in surprise as a huge dragonfly whirled past her grey muzzle, just narrowly missing her whiskers. She shook her head, flinging water off of her ears as she continued forward.

Patches of tall grasses and cattails popped up around them as they got closer to the river, and the sycamores became less dense. Grovepelt headed straight into a thick wall of grass, and the rest of the patrol followed. Swoopstrike was only a tail-length ahead of Frostpaw, but his form was quickly lost in the thick, green fronds.

The whole marsh around them was in bloom. Shocks of yellow,

blue, red and purple petals, colors that seemed to Frostpaw strangely out of place in the woods, peeked out through cracks in the walls of light green grasses that surrounded them. Frostpaw could taste a sweet hint of nectar in the air from the flowers, and despite the rain, bugs of all kinds swarmed—moths, bees, butterflies, battling with each other to get to the blossoms first. Frostpaw peered at them curiously as they padded past, so fascinated by the glittering colors of their wings and shell-like bodies that she almost forget about the discomfort of her soaked pelt clinging to her sides. Grovepelt came to a halt in the heart of the marsh, indicating with his tail for the group to spread out.

"We will hunt here today," he meowed.

He glanced over at Pinepaw and Frostpaw and spoke for what seemed to be their benefit.

"The rain sends furred creatures into their hollows and burrows. But, the animals in the marshes come out. We will have good luck with frogs and water birds here," he said. "But, be aware of the river. It is running much harder and faster from all the rain. You won't be able to wade across it like we can normally."

Frostpaw nodded. The group split up, Kestrelmoon padding off to hunt alone, Dampfang and Marshnose slinking off together. Grovepelt nodded at Pinepaw, and the two of them headed into the tall grass, vanishing from sight quickly. Frostpaw turned towards Swoopstrike. He flicked his tail to one side, away from the way the others went.

"Lets go this way. I'll teach you swamp-hunting. You'll want to use a different technique than under the trees," he said.

Frostpaw nodded and they padded off, with Swoopstrike leading. A long-winged fly fluttered past Frostpaw's face, and she paused for a moment to recline onto her haunches and bat at it with her forepaws.

"Frostpaw!" Swoopstrike snapped.

Frostpaw sunk back onto all four of her paws, ears flattening

guiltily.

"Do you plan on feeding the clan with bugs?" Swoopstrike said sarcastically, looking back at her from a few tail-lengths away through the tall green fronds.

"No," Frostpaw mumbled, padding over to him.

He rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything more about her fooling around, instead he got right down to the hunt.

"As you can see, the environment of marsh hunting is significantly different than hunting in the pine forests. In the forest, there is little to no undergrowth, but here..." Swoopstrike gestured to the tall grass on all sides of them, "The grass is thicker than fog. Vision means practically nothing, for both you and your prey. In that way it is almost like night-hunting. You need to rely on your other senses. Although it will be difficult with all the different scents and sounds mixing together around you. Luckily, the marsh is bursting full of prey, so they can't all be that hard to find."

Frostpaw nodded and Swoopstrike continued.

"You will need to alter your hunting crouch too. Remember, in the forest, there is little undergrowth, so we make ourselves as low and flat as possible and stick to the shadows to draw less attention to ourselves. Here, none of those things matter," Swoopstrike said. "If you make yourself too low and flat, all that's achieved is to bog your belly down in the mud. You will want to use a much higher stance. The grass will do the hiding."

Swoopstrike bent his knees slightly, holding his tail out straight behind him. Frostpaw copied him. He gave a curt nod.

"Good. The other thing you have to be aware of is your paws. We are walking in water and mud that goes up to our ankles," Swoopstrike said.

He lifted one paw up like he was going to take a step with it. It made a squelching noise as he freed his paw from the muck, then as he put it back down, it slapped the water, making a small splash.

"If you walk like that, the prey will hear those foot-falls from fox-lengths away. You have to glide your feet through the water, never completely lifting them out of it. Do you understand?" he said.

Frostpaw nodded hard again.

"Good," he meowed again. "Go and try it out by yourself. I'll check back in on how you're doing in a little bit."

Swoopstrike padded off, vanishing quickly into the tall grass. As he walked away, Frostpaw scented the air. She could smell rain and damp mud and musty moss mixed in with the sharp edge of the marsh grasses all around her and the hint of sweet flowers. Frostpaw breathed deeper, trying to sift through the scents in search of prey, but all the different marsh-smells were too strong. They barraged her nose with all the different notes of life around her, but not the kind of life she wanted.

Frostpaw's tail twitched uncertainly. With the constant drumming of the pouring rain, and the insects and cicadas droning in her ears, she couldn't make out where any prey was with her hearing either. Sure, she could definitely hear a chorus of frogs croaking, but mixed in with the confusion of the other sounds, she couldn't tell what direction it was coming from.

Well, frogs like to be by water. I'll check the bank near the river.

Frostpaw began to creep through the tall grass fronds around her, holding herself in the strange high-crouch Swoopstrike showed her and shuffling her paws along through the mud as well, so she wouldn't alert any prey that she happened to stumbled upon.

As Frostpaw traveled in the direction towards the stream, the sound of the rushing water grew louder in her ears. Frostpaw brushed through a patch of cattails and blinked in surprise to see the river suddenly appear. As Grovepelt had warned, the bank of the stream had moved much closer than she was used to. A fast muddy-brown colored current rushed past her paws, the rainfall turning the normally soft gurgling stream into an angry, bloated, twisted version of itself.

Frostpaw cautiously eyed the rapids. It didn't look like a place prey would be. Just from looking at it, Frostpaw could tell the water was moving much too quickly for frogs to swim through it. But, still, she could hear them croaking, seemingly all around her.

Her tail twitching slightly in frustration, Frostpaw turned her head to survey the area up and downstream from her. Through the weeds, she noticed that along the banks rain had collected into large, still pools that hadn't quite yet filled high enough yet that they ran into the edge of the river. Frostpaw noticed a flicker of greenish-brown skin moving through the grass, and her muscles tensed in anticipation.

Frogs!

Frostpaw began to creep forward, forcing her tail to be still and straight behind her even though it really wanted to twitch in excitement. As Frostpaw approached the pool, peering out at it from her hiding space in the tall grass, she could see five, six, seven! frogs all either perched at the edge of the water or floating contentedly in the shallow pool. Frostpaw tensed, safely hidden in the grass as she readied herself to pounce. She knew she couldn't catch all of the frogs at once, but frogs tended to be slow moving prey. So, she should be able to catch at least a few before the rest fled into the grass. Frostpaw fixed her gaze on a group of frogs all sitting by the edge of the pool. Taking a deep breath, she wiggled her hindquarters then pounced.

Frostpaw shot out of the grass, her paws slamming down on two of the frogs, killing them instantly. One of the other frogs in the group sprung away, towards the grass, but Frostpaw snatched it up easily in her jaws before it got lost in the tall fronds, feeling a crunch beneath her fangs as the frog died. Two other frogs had hopped into the pool with croaks of alarm, but the pool was small and shallow, with nowhere for them to hide. Frostpaw dropped the frog from her mouth and sprung into the pool, her paws flashing through the water to hook her claws into the slimy side of one of the frogs. As she fished the frog out, the other leapt away into the grass, quickly vanishing from sight. Frostpaw scooped the struggling frog out of the water with her paws, bringing it up to her muzzle to bite its head, killing it. She twisted her head to look around, but she

couldn't see anymore prey. The rest of the frogs had gotten away. Frostpaw twitched her whiskers. She still felt content with her catch of four.

Frostpaw padded out of the pool. She hardly noticed the water dripping from her legs since the rainfall still had not let up. She pushed the frogs together in a pile at the edge of the pool and scooped mud over them, casting careful glances around her to make sure some hungry, predatory bird had not seen her stash of frogs. Once the prey was adequately hidden, she padded over to a nearby tall purple flower and nipped the stalk, wincing at the taste of sickly-sweet sap in her mouth. She ripped the flower down and laid it over the mud mound of frogs.

Now I can easily find where I buried the prey, in case the rain washes my scent away.

Frostpaw raised her tail, feeling rather pleased with herself. She turned back towards the river.

If I keep following it, I'm bound to find more pools and more frogs. And, maybe some birds too!

Frostpaw padded back over to the bank, turning to walk downstream and careful to keep a tail-length's distance between her paws and the edge of the rushing water. As she walked, Frostpaw continued to sniff the air and listen intently to her surroundings, but no elucidating scents or sounds made themselves known to her, so she continued her journey onward.

After Frostpaw sprung over a large branch laying on the bank of the river, she paused walking for a moment to look out over the water. Raindrops made rings of circles in the water when they hit the surface, but only for a moment before they were snatched away by the current. And, in the cattails across the river, a tall, pure white egret stood. The bird didn't even cast Frostpaw a glance. It seemed to know there was no way Frostpaw could make it across, so she was no threat to it. Frostpaw studied the bird, her tail twitching. She wasn't even sure she could take the bird down by herself, even if it was on her side of the bank. Its long, spindly legs were taller than her. Frostpaw's ears twitched back suddenly as she heard a

loud crashing noise.

"Look out!" a voice behind her yowled.

Frostpaw had enough time to just half-turn her head towards the sound. Right next to her side she saw a flash of a long, thin beak and a large mess of grey and white feathers whip past her. Then immediately afterwards, she felt something heavy slam against her hindquarters.

She didn't even have time to see what hit her. Frostpaw's paws scrabbled for grip against the slick, muddy ground to no avail as she was shoved forward, her feet sprawling. Frostpaw slid straight into the river and found the water here was much deeper than she expected. Even in the shallows, it lapped hungrily at her shoulders.

Frostpaw's tail whipped around to try to keep her upright. She braced her feet in the muddy river bottom. But, she gasped as her legs were snatched out from under her by the powerful current. Her paws waved frantically, searching for purchase, to only find more water beneath her as she was swept into the deepest part of the river. Her heart pounded wildly in fear. Frostpaw had just enough time to let out a wail before the river gripped her its powerful claws, and her head too went under the muddy water.

The world around her was a confusing, swirling mess of dark water and mud and silt. Her eyes were stretched wide and flying around wildly, but she couldn't make any sense of the space around her. Up or down? Her paws flailed. Her heart thumped in panic. Her lungs ached from holding her breath, and even moving her legs was becoming increasingly difficult as her heavy, water-logged fur dragged through the river slowly, fighting against her motions.

Terror seized Frostpaw in an icy grip. Her muscles were burning. She was quickly growing too tired to keep battling the current. She forced herself to slow her useless flailing, hoping it would conserve her energy. Frostpaw closed her eyes, fighting her jaws to keep them shut even though her body begged her to open them and gasp for breath. Then she felt her feet brush something solid...

The river bottom.

Frostpaw clenched her fangs, summoning her remaining strength, and with all her might, she kicked off the ground to shove herself upwards. Frostpaw's head broke the surface, and she gasped for breath, feeling the burning in her chest ease and feeling energy flow back into her muscles as air flowed back into her lungs. She couldn't tell where she was; her gaze was clouded by spray from the river, and her head was bobbing up and down too much to get a good look around. All she could hear was the roaring of the the river in her ears, so that was no use to her either. But, she was still alive... for now at least. And, she had to try to stay above the water.

"Help!" Frostpaw yowled, hoping desperately that some of her patrol was able to hear her.

Her paws had settled from frantically waving in all direction in the water into some sort of instinctual paddling motion that was helping her head stay above the surface, but her strength was too sapped to actually propel herself out of the fast-moving river.

"Help!" Frostpaw wailed again.

She swirled around in the current, and her eyes widened in terror as she saw herself careening towards a large branch that was also caught in the same rapids. A powerful wave of fear surged through her veins, resupplying her energy. Frostpaw kicked her paws out, struggling to free herself from her collision course with the branch, but the strength of the river was too mighty. Frostpaw's left flank hit the branch hard, and she had just enough time to gasp for a big breath of air before the force of the blow knocked her back beneath the waves.

The world went silent around her again as she sunk deeper under the water, completely at the mercy of the river's will. As Frostpaw swirled every which way in the rapids, she felt convinced that she wouldn't be able to make it back to the surface this time. She tried to kick out her legs to push herself upwards, but they responded like she was shouting at them from miles and miles away, moving only after a delay and very sluggishly.

I can't swim back up.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed slightly. Weirdly, she didn't feel panic at the thought. She only felt exhaustion, wrapped tightly around her, stifling her, like a thick blanket of moss. But, she did feel a small spark of worry in her chest at her *lack* of panic.

If I don't swim, I'll die. She tried to motivate herself.

Frostpaw made a weak attempt to move her paws.

I'm too tired; I can't. She thought back to herself.

Frostpaw gazed blearily at her forepaws out in front of her. She could just make out their light grey color through the dark, murky water.

Would it be so bad to die? StarClan is supposed to be a nice place. And, I might get to see May again.

Frostpaw stilled, letting the river carry her wherever it wished, resigning herself to her watery fate. Then, looking out between her forepaws, Frostpaw saw a shadow of movement through the water. The shadow seemed cat-like in shape, and it was heading towards her.

...May?

A small flash of hope stirred in her chest that the spirit of her mother had come to somehow help her, or to guide her to the afterlife.

Although Frostpaw still couldn't make out the cat properly, the shadow came even closer, swimming down to right above Frostpaw. Sharp fangs sunk deeply into her scruff, bringing a sting of physical pain, which Frostpaw thought seemed very unghost-like. Frostpaw then felt herself being tugged upwards by the shadow-cat.

Frostpaw was unable to keep her jaws shut against her screaming chest any longer, and she exhaled a long stream of bubbles before inhaling water. Her lungs spasmed in protest as they tried desperately to expel the water and breathe in air, but only to find there was just more water around her. A burning sensation stabbed deep in Frostpaw's chest, and her vision started to go dark.

Am I dying?

Then Frostpaw's head breached the surface.

Frostpaw hacked some of the water out of her lungs, sucking in huge, greedy gasps of air, before falling back into a coughing fit to try get the rest of the water out. Frostpaw could feel herself still being tugged along by her scruff, and she could feel a sinuous body brushing against her back, powerful and certain paws propelling them towards the bank. Frostpaw's feet trembled, much too weak to try to paddle along, so she concentrated just on breathing, letting the cat carry her by the scruff like a little kit. Frostpaw's gaze flickered backwards towards her rescuer to see Swoopstrike, his green eyes dark with concentration and fixed on the river bank. A warm surge of gratitude flooded her chest towards her mentor, but she was still coughing too violently to express it.

The moments dragged on, and they made little progress towards the bank. A dark cloud of worry descend on Frostpaw as she began to fear that Swoopstrike wasn't strong enough to break them both out of the strong current and carry them to shore. But, then Frostpaw's ears pricked as she heard a splash, and she twisted her head towards the noise to see another cat paddling through the water towards them, navigating through the worst of the currents.

Marshnose? She thought in surprise as she recognized the brown tabby.

He swam over to them, and a second pair of jaws grabbed her scruff. Then with a strong tug, the three cats were free from the main current of the river. Frostpaw felt a surge of relief so powerful she almost passed out, but she managed to fragilely cling to consciousness as they paddled quickly to shore.

As they approached the bank, Frostpaw's paws brushed the muddy ground, and she struggled to get them under her, trying to force her feet to hold her up. Marshnose let go of her, but Swoopstrike kept a firm grip on her scruff, only releasing after he had hauled her entirely out of the river and onto the shore.

Back on firm land, Frostpaw sank to her belly, her legs shaking too

hard to stand. She turned towards Swoopstrike to see him also sinking to the muddy ground, panting hard.

"Thank you," Frostpaw gasped.

"Are you okay?" Swoopstrike rasped back in reply.

Frostpaw nodded before turning her head to hack up another few mouthfuls of river water onto the bank.

Frostpaw saw the grasses around her stir, and the rest of their hunting patrol came quickly pushing out of the weeds. Frostpaw saw Grovepelt sweep a worried gaze over the cats, and a wave of relief washed over his expression when he saw everyone was okay.

"What happened?" Grovepelt asked.

"Frostpaw fell in the river," Marshnose said, with a growl in his voice, his tail twitching.

"No. Someone pushed me," Frostpaw managed to rumble in a low voice between her coughs.

Grovepelt swept a stern gaze over the cats in the patrol, waiting for someone to speak up. Dampfang took a step forward.

"I was chasing some prey, and I didn't see Frostpaw standing there at first because of the grasses," he meowed in a steady voice. "I tried to warn her, but it was too late."

"I could've drowned!" Frostpaw gasped, forcing the words out between coughs and clenched fangs. "You didn't even give me enough of a warning so I could move out of the way!"

Dampfang looked at her with a harsh green gaze.

"You should've listened to Grovepelt's warning and not been standing that close to the river in the first place!" he spat. "Because of your carelessness, you not even put your own life in danger, but Marshnose's and Swoopstrike's too!"

Frostpaw glanced over at Swoopstrike. He was slowly rising back to

his paws, and every piece of fur on his wet pelt was bristling. Frostpaw's stomach flipped as a wave of worried nausea washed over her. Was Swoopstrike angry with her? Had she been being careless? But, to Frostpaw's surprise, Swoopstrike did not turn his fury on her, instead he whipped towards Dampfang.

"You pathetic excuse for a warrior!" Swoopstrike exploded, his green eyes burning with fury. "You think this is *her* fault? Guess what, I *saw* you run into her, you piece of snake-dung. The grasses weren't that thick since I could see you and her from a few fox-lengths away, so you, sure as StarClan, should've been able to see Frostpaw! It was *you* that must've not been paying attention. And, it was *you* that decided to put the three of our lives at risk for a *stupid* bird!"

Swoopstrike had shoved himself right into Dampfang's face. He now stood only a whisker-length away, his tail lashing behind him, his jaw clenched. Dampfang curled his lip up, looking at Swoopstrike from down his muzzle.

"I was concentrating on chasing a heron! It was so big, it would've fed *four* warriors! Frostpaw should've been more aware of the environment around her!" Dampfang snapped.

"Oh I'm sorry! A whole *heron,* you say?" Swoopstrike sneered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Let me see this amazing piece of prey that is worth more than cats' lives!"

Swoopstrike made a show of looking around Dampfang's paws, his eyes mockingly wide.

"I didn't catch it," Dampfang hissed through clenched teeth.

"Wow! I'm so shocked!" Swoopstrike spat, flattening his ears. "The mighty Dampfang that decided it was worth it to risk the lives of his clan-mates for a bird, didn't even catch it!"

A look of deep fury washed over Dampfang's face.

"You have no right to reprimand me!" Dampfang snarled. "I'm a warrior, no different than you. Not some sniveling apprentice!"

"If you don't want me to reprimand you, then stop acting like a frog-brained idiot!" Swoopstrike spat, shoving his muzzle so close to Dampfang's they almost touched.

Dampfang let out a warning hiss, his eyes glittering dangerously. Milky white claws slid out from his black-furred feet. Frostpaw's eyes widened. Her gaze flickered over to Pinepaw. The other apprentice was watching the interaction with equally as wide eyes.

Would Dampfang really attack Swoopstrike?!

"That's enough!" Grovepelt growled, shouldering his way between the bristling toms. "I will not have this come to blows!"

Grovepelt turned to look down at Frostpaw.

"Kestrelmoon, help Frostpaw and Swoopstrike back to camp. I want Clearstream to take a look at them. The rest of the us can finish the hunting patrol and bring their catches back to camp for them," Grovepelt said.

"I'm fine," Swoopstrike growled.

"Clearstream and Elmclaw will decide that," Grovepelt snapped, the normally patient deputy looking fed up.

Swoopstrike jutted out his chin, planting his paws in the ground stubbornly.

"Fine. But, before I leave, I want to know what you'll be doing to punish Dampfang for his reckless behavior," Swoopstrike said, his tail twitching behind him.

Grovepelt gave a small sigh, closing his eyes for a moment like he was desperately searching for patience.

"It sounds like he made an honest mistake," Grovepelt said slowly.

Dampfang raised his chin, shooting a smug look at Swoopstrike. Frostpaw clenched her jaw, her tail twitching in anger. She wanted to claw that expression right off his dumb muzzle.

"Which could've had dire consequences," Swoopstrike growled, narrowing his eyes at Grovepelt. "And, he didn't even try to help Frostpaw after he pushed her in!"

"...You're right," Grovepelt said, inclining his head, conceding the point. "Dampfang, you should have paid more attention to your clan-mates. You will clean the elders' den and help them with their ticks for the next five days."

"What?" Dampfang growled, his smug look dissipating like morning fog on a hot day. "But, Frostpaw was—"

"It doesn't matter that Frostpaw was standing by the river. She wouldn't've fallen in if you hadn't hit her, frog-brain!" Swoopstrike hissed, cutting him off.

Dampfang silently glowered at Swoopstrike but didn't make a move towards him.

"Come on, let's start to head back to camp," Kestrelmoon muttered, breaking the tension in the air around the group.

Kestrelmoon nudged Frostpaw's side with his muzzle. Frostpaw slowly rose to her paws. She felt the water she had swallowed lurch in her stomach nauseatingly, but she was grateful that at least her lungs were clear, and she could breathe again. She did sway slightly on her paws though; her legs still weak.

"You can lean on me," Kestrelmoon said.

Frostpaw gave him a grateful nod and leaned some of her weight against the tom's cream-colored shoulder. Frostpaw glanced over at Pinepaw.

"I caught four frogs earlier," she said to her den-mate. "They are buried upstream next to a pool. I marked the spot with a purple flower."

Pinepaw gave a curt nod.

"I'm glad you're okay," she muttered, looking away from Frostpaw.

"Thanks," Frostpaw meowed, feeling a brief flash of warmth towards Pinepaw.

Swoopstrike led the way, stalking off into the grass. Kestrelmoon turned Frostpaw and him in his direction. As they padded off, Frostpaw saw Pinepaw pad over to Dampfang.

"I could help you with the elders, if you want," Pinepaw murmured to him in a low voice.

The fur down Dampfang's back prickled.

"I don't need anyone's help," he growled before turning and stalking off.

Pinepaw silently watched him go, her tail twitching before turning and padding back over to Grovepelt. Frostpaw and Kestrelmoon pushed their way into the tall grass, cutting the rest of the patrol from view.

Broken Truce

After her fall in the river, it had been a slow journey back to camp for Frostpaw, and she had to stop once to throw up all the water sloshing around in her stomach. She had felt much better and less bloated afterwards though. Once they got to camp and saw Clearstream and Elmclaw, Swoopstrike had been given herbs and instructed to take the rest of the day easy. Frostpaw had wondered if the medicine cats had simply told him to take it easy because they knew that even if they told Swoopstrike to stay in his nest, he wouldn't unless they pinned him there.

However, Frostpaw had been given herbs to help her lungs and told to stay in her nest for a couple days so the medicine cats could make sure that the fluid had left her chest and infection would not set in. Honestly, Frostpaw hadn't minded staying a few days in the apprentices' den, waiting out the rain, especially since Redclaw doted on her, and from the entrance of the apprentices' den, she had a clear view of the elders den. So, she could watch Dampfang pick ticks off the elders with mouse-bile clutched in his jaws, and his nose wrinkled up in disgust.

After three days, Frostpaw was cleared back to normal duties and just in time too; in a few nights, the moon would be full, and it would be time for another gathering.

Frostpaw paced around camp eagerly, hardly able to keep still as she waited for Sedgestar's signal to leave. The bright, full moon hung fat and heavy in the jet black sky, shining down on the ShadowClan camp. Frostpaw glanced around at the cats chosen for the patrol. Autumnpaw was nearby, with Pinepaw a little ways away from him. Dawntail was grooming her grey side near Rowanheart. Grovepelt, Clearstream and Darkpelt were locked in a conversation. Hootflight, Leafbreeze and Swoopstrike were chatting by the camp entrance, but Sedgestar still hadn't emerged from his den.

Dampfang was sitting alone by the base of the Oak Tree. He had

completed his punishment and had been picked to join the patrol too, but Frostpaw tried to not let his presence bring her down. Frostpaw just hoped he and Swoopstrike wouldn't ruin the gathering with a fight. They had been avoiding each other in camp, and this was the closest together they had been since the river incident.

Frostpaw's thoughts turned back to the gathering, and her stomach swirled with nerves. But, not about Dampfang.

I'll finally be able to talk to Paledusk.

Frostpaw's heart jumped at the thought. It felt like it had been so long since she first saw the strange white tom, and he had said her mother's name. Frostpaw dug her claws in the damp earth. She felt like she could not stand to wait a moment longer in the dark. She had to know how he knew that name. Frostpaw paced closer to Autumnpaw.

"I'm surprised you're joining us," Pinepaw's voice said, interrupting her thoughts.

Frostpaw glanced at her and saw the black she-cat looking at her with narrowed eyes.

"I thought you'd want to stay in the apprentices' den and just have Redclaw wait on you," Pinepaw said, a slight sneer in her voice.

Frostpaw felt the fur down her back prickle and her muscles stiffen.

"Are you seriously mocking her for being pushed in the river and almost drowning?!" Autumnpaw snapped, immediately rising to his paws and coming to her defense.

Pinepaw blinked, her eyes widening as she looked taken aback.

"Of course I'm not saying I wished she drowned!" Pinepaw snapped. "But, did Frostpaw really need Redclaw carrying prey to her in her nest everyday? Her legs still work fine, don't they?"

Frostpaw glared at Pinepaw.

Why does Pinepaw want to step on my tail?! I thought we had just started to get along more.

"I didn't ask Redclaw to bring me prey," Frostpaw said, her tail twitching behind her. "She did it because she wanted to."

"Well, you should've told her you didn't need her caring for you like a tiny kit," Pinepaw said, her fangs flashing slightly.

As Pinepaw locked a fierce amber gaze on Frostpaw, Frostpaw's ears pricked as she recognized the hot emotion swirling in their depts.

*She's jealous? ...Of **me**?*

Frostpaw felt her fur flattening, and she felt the image of Pinepaw she held in her mind shift, like shadows being recast, revealing a whole new side to her.

"What?" Pinepaw snapped. "What are you staring at?"

"She's—!" Autumnpaw began, his fur bristling.

"It's fine," Frostpaw interrupted, flicking his side with her tail to signal for him to back off.

Autumnpaw's brow furrowed in confusion, but Frostpaw's gaze flickered back to Pinepaw's.

"I'm sure Redclaw would've done the same for you if you fell in the river. She likes to take care of us," Frostpaw meowed evenly.

Pinepaw just blinked at her, looking unsure of how to respond. Frostpaw twitched her ears, turning towards the sound of Sedgestar padding out of the Oak Tree den. The leader strode into the center of the camp, surveying his patrol.

"Let's go," he said, tail flicking.

The ShadowClan patrol crept though the forest towards Fourtrees without a sound. Frostpaw was close to Autumnpaw's side as the group reached the crest that led down into the hollow where the clans gathered and hesitated there. Frostpaw's heart hammered in

anticipation as she lifted her muzzle to scent the breeze. She could see in the flickering through the dark undergrowth below them that the hollow was already swarming with cats. SkyClan, WindClan and RiverClan scent was on the breeze.

Sedgestar twitched his tail, signaling for the patrol to go. The ShadowClan cats silently streamed down the hillside. Frostpaw weaved behind Autumnpaw through the undergrowth that surrounded the hollow, her gaze scanning the crowd of cats ahead of them.

Paledusk will be here right? I mean, he's SkyClan's deputy, so he must have come. Ugh, what if he's not here, and I have to wait who knows how many more moons before I can find out about how he knew May—

"Frostpaw," Swoopstrike's voice cut into her thoughts, causing Frostpaw to jump slightly.

Swoopstrike padded over to her, his gaze narrowed. Frostpaw's brow furrowed as she studied his expression. He was wearing a wary look that she hadn't seen on his face for a while now.

He's still suspicious of me? That I might betray ShadowClan?

"Yes?" Frostpaw meowed hesitantly.

"Watch what you say. These fox-hearts will take any chance they can get to exploit us," he said with a rumbling growl as he glanced at the cats around the hollow.

"Of course, Swoopstrike," Frostpaw said in a quiet voice, and he shot her a final sidewise look before padding off.

Frostpaw's tail fell as she felt her heart plummet into her stomach.

Despite all of our training together, Swoopstrike still doesn't trust me...

"What was that about?" Autumnpaw muttered to Frostpaw as Swoopstrike walked away.

Frostpaw just shook her head mutely, her whiskers drooping.

"Well, never-mind that," Autumnpaw said, catching a glance of her fallen expression.

Frostpaw heard his voice become forcibly cheerful as he tried to lighten her mood.

"Let's go find some apprentices to chat with," he meowed, "I think ShadowClan has the best relations with RiverClan right now. RiverClan'll be fun, right? We can ask them what fish tastes like."

As Frostpaw followed Autumnpaw away, her feet dragging, she felt like her paws had turned to lead. She thought she and Swoopstrike had grown closer during the moons that she'd been his apprentice. But, it looked like she was wrong.

He still thinks I'm just a rogue, an outsider.

Frostpaw sunk her claws into the ground in frustration as she padded along. She wanted to tell him that she would never betray ShadowClan. But, that she still wanted to talk to Paledusk to find out what he knew about her mother. She wouldn't tell him any ShadowClan secrets or answer any prodding questions. She wanted answers from *him*. Frostpaw's tail twitched.

Still, she knew that trying to explain this to Swoopstrike would be foolish. His nature was already prone to suspicion, and Frostpaw had a feeling that if she told him about her plan, he might jump straight to declaring her intentions treasonous.

Frostpaw's stomach flipped nervously at the thought.

Which, it's not, she assured herself.

How could asking Paledusk about her mother be treasonous? Her mother was dead. It had nothing to do with ShadowClan secrets. She didn't even want to be Paledusk's friend. She just wanted to know what he knew about May.

How is that treasonous? It's not, she repeated.

But, Frostpaw felt another thought gnawing at the back of her mind.

But, what if he didn't just know May... what if Paledusk is your father? it whispered.

Frostpaw shoved the thought away.

Don't be frog-brained. Why would I think that? There's no proof.

Frostpaw's thick-furred tail twitched.

Still, she felt like she would give almost anything if Paledusk could give her even a tiny insight, a *fragment* of a piece of May, of her family. Some sliver that Frostpaw could carry with her in her heart, to remind her of May, to better understand May, to make her feel less isolated on those depressing days when she remembered how alone she really was. Like when she saw Snakeeyes with Rowanheart and their kits, watching them with such fierce pride. When she saw Larkfoot sharing tongues with Dewleaf, the two wrapped in contented silence like nothing was better than their shared presence. Or, when she saw Redclaw chatting with Pinepaw. Even though Pinepaw may cast Frostpaw jealous looks, and Redclaw may happily carry fresh-kill to Frostpaw as she recovered in her nest, Frostpaw still knew, Redclaw wasn't her real mother.

The crowd of cats Autumnpaw was leading her through was thick, and Frostpaw found it easy enough to slow her pace, cutting herself off from the sight of her friend's dark ginger pelt. Frostpaw veered off from the direction Autumnpaw was padding in, and instead made her way through the crowd of talking cats, heading towards the tall, shadowed Great Rock. The top was bare right now; the leaders hadn't taken their places yet, but Frostpaw hoped that them, and their deputies, would be hanging around nearby.

Except for Sedgestar and Grovepelt.

Her tail twitched guiltily at the thought, but she knew that if her leader or deputy saw her talking to the SkyClan deputy, there was a good chance Swoopstrike would find out too. And, she couldn't risk that happening. As Frostpaw approached the great, towering stone, she felt the nervousness inside her swirl in her stomach and nip at her muscles even more violently than before. The Great Rock looked even bigger up close, and it loomed over her forebodingly. It

jutted up at an angle, blotting out the light of the moon as Frostpaw came closer and stepped into its shadow. Frostpaw's ears flattened. She felt like she could feel the weight of the rock pressing down at her, and she half expected that it would come crashing down at any moment now, crushing her. Frostpaw took a deep breath and held it in her lungs, trying to wrestle control back from the sudden blizzard of raging anxiety that stormed inside her. It was at that moment, when she padded around a corner of the Great Rock that she spotted the white tom.

Paledusk was sitting a little ways away from the base of the Great Rock, a few fox-lengths away from her. He was facing away from Frostpaw and looking out into the crowd, his green eyes even and his expression smooth and unreadable as he swept his gaze over the chattering cats. Sitting alone, he cut a regal silhouette in the moonlight, like a lone white flower blooming in a sea of blue-green moss. His long, pale fur was immaculately groomed, and it fell down his sides in a sleek unbroken wave.

Frostpaw's goal reappeared in her mind, and she steadied herself to approach him. She didn't have much time. Soon enough Sedgestar or Grovepelt would arrive here, or someone would go speak to the SkyClan deputy, ruining her chance. Frostpaw forced her feet forward.

"Paledusk?" Frostpaw meowed, emerging from the shadows cast from the Great Rock.

The white tom's tufted ears pricked in surprise, and he turned towards her. It was Frostpaw's first close, clear look at the SkyClan's deputy's face, and she realized his white pelt was not as unbroken as she previously thought. Paledusk had one scar across his face; it snaked from under his eye and across his cheekbone like a crescent moon. Still, he was a handsome tom, with large, clear green eyes, which swept over Frostpaw coldly.

"Yes? Who are you?" Paledusk said in a deep, rumbling voice.

"...My name is Frostpaw," Frostpaw began, her voice trembling slightly.

She swallowed hard, trying to bury her nervousness, not wanting the intimidating SkyClan deputy to notice it.

"I'm a ShadowClan apprentice," she continued. "We met briefly, a few gatherings ago. You called me the name 'May.'"

Paledusk's white tail twitched slightly, but he was silent, like he was waiting for her to continue.

"Do you remember?" Frostpaw pressed.

"I recall," Paledusk drawled haughtily, inclining his head.

"Wh-why did you call me that?" Frostpaw stammered.

Paledusk's green eyes narrowed.

"I was surprised because you resemble a rogue I knew briefly a few seasons ago," he said with a careless flick of his tail. "That was her name."

"I think that rogue you are talking about is my mother," Frostpaw said, the words rushing out of her quickly now as her heart hammered in her chest. "She looked like me, and her name was also May. We joined ShadowClan when I was little, but she died soon afterwards."

"Ah," Paledusk said, twitching his ears dismissively at the mention of May's death. "Possibly. It's hard to say. I didn't know her well, only caught her sniffing around SkyClan territory a couple of times."

Frostpaw's stomach clenched at his words, her ears flattening.

If he barely knew her, how would he know her name? And, why would he have looked so startled a few moons ago to see me?

Frostpaw hesitated, her heart hammering in her chest as the questions that she really wanted to ask about her mother lingered on her tongue.

Is Paledusk... lying to me?

The SkyClan deputy seemed so confident though. His eyes were cool and certain. There wasn't any hint of anything in his expression which showed he might be holding something back.

"Re-Really?" Frostpaw asked haltingly. "I just mean... You seemed pretty surprised when you saw me so..."

"I was simply caught off guard to see what I thought was a rogue at the Gathering," Paledusk snapped, cutting her off, his tone growing more and more impatient as he locked his cold green eyes on her.

Frostpaw froze in place, her eyes wide, like a mouse trapped in the gaze of a hunter with nowhere to flee.

"...Are you questioning me, apprentice?" Paledusk said, a hint of his fangs baring as he growled out the words.

His previously smooth, expressionless face became stormier by the moment, and Frostpaw's heart began to beat harder at the darkening of his gaze. Icy fear trickled into her veins.

"No. No. I just thought—" Frostpaw stammered, cowering slightly.

"Listen closely," Paledusk hissed in a hushed voice, his gaze suddenly becoming frighteningly intense as he leaned in, looming over Frostpaw.

Frostpaw's muscles tensed. He was so close now, Frostpaw could feel the heat of his breath stir her whiskers.

"There is nothing that I care about more than SkyClan. Nothing!" Paledusk hissed, a manic energy burning in his green eyes. "I don't know what you think you're up to, *apprentice*, but heed this: if you spread any baseless rumors that threaten me or my Clan, I promise you, all of SkyClan will be breathing down your and ShadowClan's neck before you can say 'mouse.' Got it? And, any tragedies that befall ShadowClan because of it will be all. Your. Fault."

Frostpaw swallowed, taking a quick pace backwards, away from the looming deputy, her heart hammering so hard she thought it might beat out of her chest.

"Now get out of my sight, furball," Paledusk spat.

Frostpaw obeyed. She wanted to turn tail and bolt, but with all of the cats around that would draw unwanted attention. So, without another word, Frostpaw pivoted around and padded off. On the outside, her pace looked reasonable, but inside, she was fighting her legs to keep her from shooting forward, clawing up the ground. Frostpaw's pelt prickled with nervousness as she dived into the crowd, twining her way through the thronging group of cats, her hurried gaze jumping from cat to cat, scanning for the sight of a familiar pelt. She let out a huge sigh of relief when Autumnpaw's red and white pelt came into her view, and now she couldn't stop herself from haring over to where he was talking with Larchpaw of SkyClan, and two other apprentices that smelt like fish— RiverClan presumably.

"So then, when I had the WindClan warrior pinned, Poolpaw sprang over and— Oh! Frostpaw there you are, are you alright?" Autumnpaw asked as Frostpaw appeared at his side, her eyes still wide with fright.

Frostpaw attempted to flatten her bristling pelt, unsure of what to tell her den-mate, and the other apprentices, all of who were peering at her with mixed looks of concern and curiosity.

"I just had the most horrible conversation!" Frostpaw said, giving her pelt a shake, like she was trying to shake off the memory of the interaction.

"What happened? Was it WindClan?" Autumnpaw growled, raising his head to sweep his gaze fiercely over the cats in the area surrounding them.

"No... it was..." Frostpaw muttered, shooting an awkward glance at Larchpaw. "I wound up talking to Paledusk...and he..."

Larchpaw winced sympathetically as Frostpaw trailed off, not wanting to insult the SkyClan apprentice.

"Paledusk can be severe," she admitted. "But, he's got SkyClan's best interests at heart."

SkyClan's? Or his own?

But, Frostpaw didn't say her doubts out loud. Instead she just nodded.

"I shouldn't have bothered him," she muttered, shuffling her paws.

Autumnpaw gave her a small, affectionate shove.

"Hey, buck up! It is a gathering after all, we're supposed to be having fun!"

Autumnpaw flicked his tail at the RiverClan cats.

"This is Finchpaw and Otterpaw from RiverClan," he said, giving them both a nod.

Finchpaw was a sandy colored tom, and Otterpaw was a sleek dark brown she-cat. They blinked politely at Frostpaw as they were introduced.

"Hello, I'm Frostpaw," Frostpaw said with a friendly twitch of her whiskers, pushing the thoughts of Paledusk away. "How long have you two been training?"

"About a moon," Finchpaw said in a soft spoken voice, glancing down at his soft-furred paws.

"And, three moons for me," Otterpaw said, raising her chin. "But, this is both of our first gatherings."

"We've been training for around three moons too," Autumnpaw said, flicking his tail to indicate himself and Frostpaw. "This is our second gathering."

"Lucky," Otterpaw said with a huff, shaking her head. "My littermate, Hailpaw, is our medicine cat apprentice, so she's gotten to go to all three gatherings since we started training."

Otterpaw shot a jealous glance at the edge of the hollow were the medicine cats gathered.

"Hey, there you guys are," Pinepaw's voice said.

Frostpaw turned her head to see her padding up to the group. Autumnpaw's ears pricked in surprise at his sister's appearance.

"I thought you'd be hanging out with Dampfang," Autumnpaw said.

Pinepaw's fur fluffed out defensively, and for a heartbeat, it looked like she was going to snap at him. But, then the dark she-cat just looked away and shrugged.

"He's busy talking to some *warriors,*" she muttered, an edge of bitterness to her voice. "About some important *warrior*-stuff."

"What important stuff does Dampfang have to talk about?" Autumnpaw said with an eye-roll. "How to spend all day telling everyone how great you are?"

Frostpaw thought Pinepaw would defend Dampfang, like she always did, but instead Pinepaw just let out a quiet huff of amusement, taking a seat by Frostpaw and Autumnpaw, her gaze flickering to the other nearby apprentices.

"SkyClan and RiverClan?" she meowed, guessing by their scents.

The other apprentices nodded, confirming.

"Huh, your Clans are neighbors. Do SkyClan and RiverClan get along?" Pinepaw asked, tilting her head.

Frostpaw's eyes widened slightly at the blunt question, but the other Clans' apprentices didn't seem offended by Pinepaw's curiosity.

"Yeah, we hardly cross paths," Larchpaw meowed with shrug. "They're all the way on the other side of the river."

"And, SkyClan wouldn't jump into the water, even if their fur was on fire!" Otterpaw said with a huff of amusement.

Everyone purred, but Frostpaw noticed Otterpaw eyeing the ShadowClan apprentices from the corner of her gaze. She saw an odd gleam in the RiverClan cat's eye.

"Although I suppose we're lucky that RiverClan and ShadowClan are not neighbors. ShadowClan must not care too much about getting their pelts wet right?" Otterpaw continued. "I mean, your territory is so marshy, half of it practically must be underwater. You'd probably feel right at home in RiverClan."

Frostpaw felt some of her fur start to rise. Although Otterpaw's tone was light and friendly, she couldn't shake the creeping feeling that the RiverClan appreciate was trying to stir up trouble, like she was poking at a den of adders.

"Not really. It's much more like mud than a river," Autumnpaw chimed in, appearing totally oblivious. "No swimming required...usually."

Frostpaw's blue gaze met Pinepaw's amber one. She saw Pinepaw's eyes narrow almost imperceptibly, and Frostpaw saw a question in her gaze. A sort of *"Did you hear that too?"* Frostpaw gave a faint nod, and Pinepaw turned away, back towards Otterpaw.

"Are you suggesting that if we were neighbors, ShadowClan would attack RiverClan?" Pinepaw asked, a quiet warning in her tone. "Even though we're on good terms with you all?"

"Sure, right now," Otterpaw said with a dismissive tail-flick. "But, we're on the other side of the forest from you. All I'm saying is, who knows what it would like to be your neighbor. After all, you all aren't the friendliest with ThunderClan and WindClan."

"Of course we have the most trouble with them. Their territory borders ours, so they are the ones that are most able to steal our prey or trespass," Pinepaw said with an eye roll. "But, that doesn't mean that we purposefully aggravate them. If they stayed on their sides of the scent-markers, we wouldn't have a problem."

Otterpaw shrugged.

"I'm just saying that every kit knows ShadowClan is the most aggressive, prickly clan. Our elders say that the cold northern winds that blow over your territory chill your hearts," Otterpaw said, her gaze flickering to Larchpaw and to Finchpaw as if to confirm. "It

might be hard to be neighbors with cats like that."

Autumnpaw flattened his ears, and Pinepaw's lip curled up slightly. Even Frostpaw felt herself forcing the fur on her shoulders to lie flat.

"You better watch your tongue!" Autumnpaw snapped, baring his teeth.

Frostpaw lay her tail against Autumnpaw's side in a silent reminder to him that it was the night of the truce, but Frostpaw too felt indignant anger starting to bubble in her chest.

ShadowClan hasn't even done anything to her or RiverClan! How can Otterpaw just sit here and insult us to our faces! Does she want to start a fight?!

"Just because we aren't afraid to fight and defend what is ours, doesn't automatically make us 'prickly,'" Pinepaw said.

Pinepaw was trying really hard to keep the anger in the voice under control, although Frostpaw could still hear Pinepaw's teeth grinding as she forced out the mild words.

Otterpaw snickered but didn't reply. Pinepaw turned away from her, evidently done with this conversation. Frostpaw and Autumnpaw made their way to follow her, but Frostpaw noticed Otterpaw lean in close to Finchpaw.

"Spoken like a truly aggressive cat," Otterpaw whispered to Finchpaw, but in a voice loud enough to carry to the ShadowClan apprentices. "If they're going to be like this, it's a wonder that ShadowClan is even invited to the gatherings."

Frostpaw's, Pinepaw's and Autumnpaw's gazes all met. Frostpaw read their tense expressions, and she felt a silent agreement pass through them. It was a gathering, so no fighting of course, but they couldn't leave now with Otterpaw having got the last word. Autumnpaw raised his chin and turned on Otterpaw, stalking right up to her. Frostpaw and Pinepaw followed.

"Want to say that again to our faces?" Autumnpaw growled,

narrowing his eyes at the sleek brown-furred apprentice. "You think we're aggressive, but you're the one that keeps stepping on our tails!"

"ShadowClan is just as much of a clan as RiverClan," Frostpaw said in a low voice, her ears flat against her head and tail twitching behind her. "We deserve our place at the gathering just as much as you."

Otterpaw raised her chin in response, but was silent.

"Huh, so you're a mouse-heart then; only strike when our backs are turned, right?" Pinepaw spat, her tail bushed out and twitching. "Why don't you run back to your camp and hide behind your river, little mouse."

Otterpaw's eyes narrowed in anger, but the apprentices' confrontation was interrupted when the bushes encircling the hollow shivered. The ThunderClan patrol came streaming out of them at a hurried pace with Morningstar was at its head. And, as they entered the hollow, his clan remained group tightly together, not spreading out to mingle with the others, while Morningstar charged right at the Great Rock, bounding up its side. At the apex of the boulder, Morningstar threw his head back, letting out a yowl to signal the gathering to begin.

"Let's go," Frostpaw muttered.

Pinepaw, Autumnpaw, and Frostpaw stalked away from the RiverClan apprentices, going to sit next to Hootflight and two SkyClan warriors. Morningstar waited on the boulder, his tail twitching impatiently as the other four leaders scrambled up the side of the Great Rock.

"I'll begin," Morningstar growled, not even waiting for the other leaders to sit down.

Frostpaw's gaze flickered to Sedgestar, wondering what her leader thought of Morningstar's impatient attitude, but Sedgestar's face was unreadable.

Morningstar turned towards Fennelstar, baring his teeth at the pale brown tom.

"Enough is enough," Morningstar snarled. "SkyClan continues to harass our patrols and hunt on our land. They show total disregard for our borders. I ask Fennelstar to explain his boorish behavior and flagrant disrespect of the warrior code."

The ThunderClan cats echoed Morningstar's speech with furious snarls and yowls. Fennelstar narrowed his eyes at Morningstar.

"Even *if* SkyClan was on your land," Fennelstar said, his tail twitching slightly behind him. "It does not break the warrior code. Border skirmishes between clans happen all of the time. No law forbids it."

"So you still deny it!" Morningstar spat, the thick grey fur down his back bristling and his fangs flashing in the moonlight. "I don't believe you. No leader can be so ignorant to the actions of his warriors. Unless you really are that *entirely* stupid."

SkyClan cats snarled at the insult, springing to their paws. Frostpaw's stomach flipped as she watched as ThunderClan turned towards them, claws unsheathing. Pinepaw's pelt was prickling. Autumnpaw shifted next to Frostpaw, his eyes widening in alarm. Frostpaw leaned closer to him, her muscles tensing in case the gathering around her burst into a battle. Frostpaw's gaze sought out Sedgestar on the Great Rock.

Will he do something?

Sedgestar had defused the tension between the ThunderClan leader and SkyClan leader at a gathering before, but now he hung back on the Great Rock, not moving. But, his clear gaze missed nothing between Morningstar and Fennelstar.

Fennelstar licked one of his paws, slowly drawing it across his whiskers like he was totally oblivious to the crackling tension below him. But, Frostpaw could see his eyes were still sharp, narrowed slits.

"Maybe..." Fennelstar drawled. "If ThunderClan is so concerned with the doings of SkyClan, you should try stopping us with claws... Instead of just complaining about it at the gathering."

Fennelstar's gaze flickered around the hollow, taking in the bristling ThunderClan cats.

"That is of course... unless you are too weak or cowardly to fight," Fennelstar sneered.

Frostpaw's eyes widened, shocked.

The nerve of him!

The ThunderClan cats yowled battlecries.

"Gladly!" Acornear snarled from the base of the Great Rock.

The brown tom flung himself at Paledusk, sinking his claws into the thick white ruff of fur around the SkyClan deputy's neck. As suddenly as a flash of lightning, the clearing around Frostpaw exploded into a fight. Frostpaw saw Hootflight shoved aside as the two SkyClan cats he was sitting next to charged around them, yowling as they threw themselves into the fray. Frostpaw's eyes flew around the screaming, writhing cats in the clearing.

What do we do?!

"ShadowClan! Come on!" Grovepelt's voice rumbled as he bounded past the group with some other warriors in tow.

"Are we leaving?" Autumnpaw asked as the group dashed after the deputy.

"The truce has been broken. The gathering is over, and this is not our quarrel to fight," Grovepelt rumbled.

As if Grovepelt's words had summoned it, a darkness fell over the hollow, and the deep rumble of thunder cut through the yowls of the fighting cats. Frostpaw looked up to see angry, black storm clouds covering the sky, obscuring the full moon.

"StarClan is angry!" some cat wailed.

"This isn't over ThunderClan!" someone else snarled, and Frostpaw recognized the voice as Paledusk's.

The gathering had turned from thrashing chaos bathed in the silver light of the moon, to fleeing shadows that cast barely a flicker in the oppressive darkness.

"Everyone here?" Sedgestar's voice called as the ShadowClan cats gathered at the edge of the hollow.

"Yes," Grovepelt responded.

"Back to our territory," Sedgestar commanded. "And, quickly too."

As the ShadowClan cats ran from the hollow, a torrential downpour began to fall.

Enemies and Allies

It had only been a few sunrises since the broken truce of the gathering, and the ShadowClan camp was abuzz with energy. Even though the fighting had not directly involved them, everyone was still on edge, especially since the storm StarClan had sent after the gathering had raged all night and the next day. A branch from the Oak Tree had even broken off from the vicious winds and had fallen smack into the center of the camp, almost crushing Dustleap, who had been walking past at the time. Luckily, the wide limb had mostly missed him. He had only been grazed by the smaller branches at the end, so the ginger warrior just had some bruises and scratches to show from the close call.

The big, two fox-length long and tail-length wide, branch hadn't yet been moved out of the camp. It remained lying right in the center of the clearing, constantly reminding everyone that looked at it of what seemed to be a clear omen— StarClan was angry, and their anger was not limited to only ThunderClan and SkyClan.

It wasn't raining anymore now, though. It was sun-high, and there wasn't a cloud to be seen. The green-leaf sun was shining hotly down on the camp as cats lounged about, gossiping about the other clans, sharing tongues and eating prey.

Frostpaw had just got back from a hunting patrol, and she and Pinepaw were now carrying a pair of frogs to the nursery for Snakeeyes and her kits. After they had been fed, the apprentices could go get some prey for themselves. Snakeeyes' long, slinky form was sprawled out in a pool of sunlight in front of the nursery, watching her three kits tumbling a few tail-lengths in front of her with drowsy, half-lidded eyes. Frostpaw's gaze flickered to Lizardkit, and she watched the small white tom pounce on his brother, giving Yewkit's ear a sharp nip.

Lizardkit's deafness was now an open secret in ShadowClan. Every cat knew, but it was only talked about in hushed whispers. And, *especially* no one talked about how it would impact his future in

front of Snakeeyes. Unless they wanted to get their whiskers clawed off by her that is. Frostpaw had been keeping an eye on Lizardkit for the past couple of moons. He didn't speak, of course, but beyond that, he was still an oddly silent kit. He didn't meow or growl or yowl, even if one of his siblings nipped his tail too hard. Frostpaw had heard him purr before, though, and she wondered if maybe he didn't make growls or yowls because he never heard them, so didn't understand what they meant. But, he knew how to purr because he could feel the vibrations in his body and in the body's of other cats when they purred, like his mother or his litter-mates. Beyond his silence, though, he seemed to be a relatively normal kit. He at least got into the same amount of mischief that his litter-mates did.

Snakeeyes' gaze flickered open as Frostpaw and Pinepaw padded over to her, giving them a welcoming purr. Lizardkit disentangled himself from Yewkit and Lizardkit, bounding over to Frostpaw and Pinepaw, his tail raised and waving in greeting.

"Hello," Frostpaw purred to Snakeeyes and the kits.

She raised and waved her tail back at Lizardkit. Snakeeyes, Rowanheart and their kits had started to develop their own sort of language to talk to Lizardkit. Some signs were easy; cats already often greeted each other by raising their tail and vibrating it in a small wave, so it had been simple for Snakeeyes to adopt that and teach it to Lizardkit as a way to say "hello." Frostpaw had made an effort to try to learn the signs as well. When she was a kit, without a family, she had felt so isolated and alone. She didn't want Lizardkit to feel the same way, being only able to talk to his litter-mates or his parents his whole life.

"Hi Frostpaw!" Featherkit squeaked excitedly. "Is that frog for us?"

Featherkit signed her words as she spoke them, splaying her paws out like webbed feet to mean "frog," then flicking her tail to indicate the cats around her, as in "Our frog?"

"Yes," Frostpaw said, being sure to nod too, so Lizardkit understood, as she drop the frog by the kits.

Featherkit and Yewkit had learned to speak right along with

Lizardkit learned to sign, and they were just as fluent in signing as Lizardkit was. It seemed like Featherkit and Yewkit were in constant motion every time Frostpaw spoke to them, the signs coming to them just as easily as words.

Pinepaw carried the other frog over to Snakeeyes as Lizardkit swiftly signed *thank you* by blinking his eyes before bending his head to take a big bite of the frog.

"I'm glad you came to bring us fresh-kill!" Snakeeyes purred to Frostpaw as she padded over to the queen. "I've got some more signs to show you!"

Snakeeyes taught Frostpaw the sign for hunt, a crouch, which seemed obvious enough.

"And, Lizardkit came up with these next signs," Snakeeyes said, her chin raised with pride.

She showed Frostpaw the sign for bird, a swift swish of a claw. And, a sign for strength, a slight arching of the back in combination with the straightening of the tail. Frostpaw copied them and Snakeeyes nodded her head in approval.

"I'm also working on something new with Lizardkit," Snakeeyes said. "I'm hoping that he will be able to watch our mouths and figure out the words we are saying by the shape of our mouths and our expressions. I'm pairing words with signs to teach him what signs go with what mouth shape. He's starting to get it. And, I think him being around his litter-mates definitely help, since they sign everything they say anyway!"

"Wow! That's such an amazing idea!" Frostpaw said, her eyes stretched wide. "Then he'll be able to understand everyone that talks to him!"

Snakeeyes nodded, her gaze shining with pride and satisfaction.

"Soon nothing will be able to stop him," she said.

Frostpaw purred. Her chest filled with warmth for the queen. And, for Lizardkit. He was fortunate to have such a supportive and fierce

mother. Snakeeyes stretched languidly, her back arching inwards as she stretched each hind leg out behind her individually.

"I'm just going to step out of camp for a moment and walk around the barrier. Do you have any duties to attend to or do you mind keeping an eye on them for a few moments? I feel like I'm dying to stretch my legs; it's hard work being stuck in the nursery for moons!" Snakeeyes said.

"No worries," Frostpaw said, waving her tail to send Snakeeyes off. "I'll keep them out of trouble."

"You're the best Frostpaw!" Snakeeyes purred with an affectionate blink.

She playfully swatted at Frostpaw's ear with her thin white tail as she padded off, but Frostpaw dodged the blow, ducking swiftly.

"You're getting quicker!" Snakeyes laughed over her shoulder.

"Of course I am! Swoopstrike's been training me," Frostpaw purred.

Frostpaw watched the queen pad off towards the thorn tunnel for a moment before turning her head back towards the kits. Frostpaw blinked in surprise to see that Pinepaw was still there, sitting a few tail-lengths away from the still eating kittens. Frostpaw had thought Pinepaw would've left to eat something herself while she and Snakeeyes had been talking. Pinepaw looked away when Frostpaw glanced at her; the air around her seemed to be a mixture of embarrassment and wary curiosity. After a moment of hesitation, Frostpaw closed the small distance between the two of them, giving Pinepaw a friendly blink.

"Did you hear what Snakeeyes was telling me about teaching Lizardkit to understand what words go with mouth-shape?" Frostpaw meowed in an even voice, like having Pinepaw still hanging around with her was the most natural thing in the world.

Frostpaw knew better than to ask Pinepaw why she was still there. The prickly apprentice would view such a direct question as accusatory and get defensive. Then all Frostpaw would succeed in

would be getting her whiskers clawed off, or Pinepaw stalking off. Or, both most likely.

Pinepaw nodded silently, her expression stiff.

"That's pretty cool isn't it? Soon it'll be like he's no different than any hearing cat," Frostpaw said, turning from Pinepaw to watch the kits.

The kittens had finished eating and now were grooming the last bits of food from their whiskers. Frostpaw watched Lizardkit twist his head around to try to flatten an unruly piece of fur on his back with swift licks of his tongue. Frostpaw felt Pinepaw shift slightly beside her as she relaxed a bit as they watched the kits.

"That's not true though, right? How will he hear orders in battle?" she asked in a low voice. "When it's dark or when there are a lot of cats swarming around so it's confusing for him to see?"

Now it was Frostpaw's turn to tense up. Her tail flicked behind her uncertainty.

"I don't know," she admitted. "It will still be hard for him. Harder than normal. But, Lizardkit is very smart. He must be to figure it out. He's already figured out this whole new language. He even makes his own signs for new things now and teaches them to his family!"

Frostpaw glanced over at Pinepaw, and she thought she saw an impressed expression on the black-furred she-cat's face.

"Would you like to learn a few signs?" Frostpaw meowed, her voice becoming a bit shy.

The question was a gamble. Frostpaw wasn't sure if Pinepaw would ever accept learning anything from Frostpaw.

She is so proud, and I'm just a lowly rogue to her. What could I teach her?

And, sure enough, Pinepaw tensed up like Frostpaw had just asked her if she wanted to eat fox-dung. Frostpaw looked away from her,

feeling a flash of bitterness.

"Forget I—" Frostpaw began, her tail twitching.

"Okay," Pinepaw said curtly, interrupting her.

Frostpaw's ears pricked in surprise. She turned to look at Pinepaw, wide-eyed. The she-cat next to her was still stiff, her ears slightly angled back, but she had agreed!

"I— oh— okay," Frostpaw said quickly. "...That's great! I know Lizardkit will be really happy to have someone else able to talk to him!"

Frostpaw rose to her feet and padded closer to the kits. Pinepaw followed her just a footfall behind.

"Hey guys!" Frostpaw called, waving her tail to get their attention.

The three little kit-faces turned to look at her. Yewkit's tongue still peeked out of his mouth, caught mid-groom.

"Pinepaw would like to learn some signs so she can talk to Lizardkit! Do you think you could show us?" Frostpaw asked, settling down into a comfortable crouch in front of the kits and tucking her paws under her body.

Pinepaw hesitated for a moment before sitting a tail-length away from her.

"Sure!" Featherkit said before giving Yewkit a shove. "Hey! Your tongue is hanging out, frog-brain!"

"Oops," Yewkit said, closing his mouth, making Frostpaw purr. "What do you want to learn Pinepaw?"

"Er—," Pinepaw said, shifting uncertainly. "Maybe how to tell him my name?"

As Featherkit and Yewkit showed Pinepaw the correct motions to sign a greeting and the parts of her name, the signs for *pine* and for *paw,* which also had a double-meaning— either an actual paw or an

apprentice, Lizardkit came bounding over to Frostpaw, disinterested in his siblings explanation of signs. He greeted Frostpaw with a purr, then nuzzled into her fluffy side, his bright blue eyes blinking sleepily like he was on the verge of nodding off after his big meal. Frostpaw purred back at him and leaned over to groom flat the piece of stubborn fur on his back that Lizardkit hadn't been able to get himself. But, then Frostpaw nudged his face with his muzzle to wake him up, and flicking her tail at Pinepaw to draw his attention to her.

"I think she has something to say to you," Frostpaw said, accompanying her words with rudimentary signs, which she hoped Lizardkit understood.

Lizardkit blinked curiously at Frostpaw before turning his gaze to Pinepaw. The other kits had finished explaining the signs to Pinepaw, and she now turned towards Lizardkit.

"Um... hello," Pinepaw said. "Wait... I mean— hello."

This time Pinepaw waved her tail in greeting along with her words.

Lizardkit waved his tail back, his gaze curious. Frostpaw saw Pinepaw's face brighten at his encouraging response.

"My name is Pinepaw," she said, touching her paw to her chest to indicate herself, before signing "paw;" shaking her own paw to indicate it, followed by "pine," which is a sign that involved bristling out your straight tail.

*Not to be confused with the sign for "fear" which involved bristling out your **curved** tail,* Frostpaw reminded herself.

Lizardkit perked up, his little face becoming excited. He rose to his feet and signed back *I'm Lizardkit.*

The "kit" sign was a little different from the apprentice one. Lizardkit still waved his paw, but it was with the foot curled inward, towards himself. The sign for a warrior was also a wave of the paw, similar to the apprentice sign, but with the claws extended.

"He said his name is Lizardkit," Featherkit said helpfully.

"I know his name," Pinepaw said, her ears flattening in a way that looked a little flustered.

"But, you didn't know how to say his name in the way he would understand it," Yewkit meowed helpfully. "Now you do!"

"Oh... right," Pinepaw said, her brow furrowing slightly.

Lizardkit was still watching Pinepaw with interest, like he was hoping for her to continue.

"Why don't we play a game?" Frostpaw cut in, rising to her paws.

"Let's play moss-ball!" Yewkit yowled.

"Let me find some moss!" Featherkit said, whirling around in a circle, her eyes wide as she scanned the area around them.

Lizardkit shot over to his siblings, going from sleepy to wide awake almost instantly when the prospect of a game appeared.

Pinepaw and Frostpaw's gazes met. Pinepaw rolled her eyes exaggeratedly at the rumbustiousness of the kits, and Frostpaw stifled a purr. But, then a dark shadow drifted over Pinepaw's face. Her head jerked up suddenly.

"I smell ThunderClan," Pinepaw growled.

Frostpaw tasted the air, her heart dropping into her stomach. Pinepaw was right. ThunderClan's musty, nutty scent had twined its way into the clear, powerful odor of the ShadowClan camp. ThunderClan warriors were close.

Frostpaw's gaze followed Pinepaw's towards the bramble barrier and the tunnel entrance in it. Frostpaw's stomach went tight with nerves as she saw the brambles shake, and she tensed her muscles, springing in front of the kits, her teeth and claws bared as she prepared to see enemy warriors come streaming through the tunnel. But, it was Dawntail that emerged. The grey and white warrior's expression was tight, but calm. Frostpaw's stance relaxed as the

swirling fear and aggression in her stomach settled. Her gaze slid behind her clan-mate to see Morningstar emerge from the tunnel just after Dawntail. After Morningstar came Acornear, the ThunderClan deputy. Then the rest of the ShadowClan patrol entered behind him, flanking the ThunderClan warriors.

"ThunderClan?" Featherkit echoed, her voice a squeak as she peered around Frostpaw's legs. "Are those cats from ThunderClan?"

"Yes," Frostpaw said quietly. "The grey cat is Morningstar, their leader. The tabby is Acornear, the deputy."

"Why are they here?" Yewkit said, gazing at the unfamiliar cats in confusion.

Frostpaw's gaze sought Pinepaw's and their eyes met.

"I don't know," Frostpaw meowed.

Lizardkit rose to his paws, his expression quizzical. He took a few steps in the direction of the ThunderClan warriors. Frostpaw quickly thumped her tail down in front of him. His clear blue eyes flickered up towards her, and Frostpaw firmly shook her head at him. Getting the message, Lizardkit took a seat, content to watch the strangers from the distance. The ThunderClan cats remained surrounded by the ShadowClan patrol in the center of camp, while Dawntail slipped into the leader's den at the roots of the Oak Tree to get Sedgestar. The quiet buzz of conversation that had filled the camp moments before the enemy warriors' appearance was silenced, and now everyone around camp just silently stared wide-eyed at the ThunderClan cats like a big group of owls. Frostpaw saw Acornear and Morningstar shift uncomfortable under the heat of so many eyes. Frostpaw's gaze flittered over their coats. The ThunderClan cats seemed unusually skinny, considering it was still the heart of green-leaf.

"How do I tell Lizardkit that it's ThunderClan's leader?" Frostpaw whispered to Featherkit, keeping her voice low to prevent attention being drawn to her.

Featherkit touched one of her paws to her forehead.

"This means *leader,"* she meowed in a soft voice.

Featherkit rubbed her cheek against Yewkit's.

"And, this means *clan.* Like, because clan-mates like each other and share tongues," Featherkit said before hesitating, her expression unsure. "But, I don't know how to tell him that it's ThunderClan."

Frostpaw touched Lizardkit's flank with her tail to get his attention. His gaze flickered over to her. Frostpaw twitched her tail in Morningstar's direction before touching her paw to her forehead and leaning down to rub her cheek against Lizardkit's. When Frostpaw lifted her head, Lizardkit's eyes were round with confusion. Lizardkit flicked his tail towards Sedgestar's den before signing *clan leader* back at her.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed.

He thinks I mean Sedgestar.

Frostpaw shook her head at him. She leaned down, rubbing her cheek against his to sign *clan* again. Then when she raised her head, she tapped her paw on the ground five times, one for each of the five clans to show it was a different leader. Frostpaw wasn't sure if Lizardkit totally understood, but the confusion clouding his gaze cleared, and his ears pricked in interest. His paws and tail began to move too quickly in signs for Frostpaw to understand, but they were interrupted when Snakeeyes reappeared, stalking quickly over to her kits, gathering them up towards her. Frostpaw saw the queen shoot a suspicious look towards the ThunderClan cats.

Then, Sedgestar and Grovepelt emerged from the leader's den, followed closely by Dawntail. Sedgestar met his gaze evenly to Morningstar's, his head and tail held high.

"Greetings, Morningstar," Sedgestar said, his voice cooly polite but not hostile. "Dawntail told me that her patrol found you and your deputy at the border, waiting for an escort. What do you need from ShadowClan?"

"Sedgestar," Morningstar greeted him, bowing his head deeply in a

sign of respect towards the ShadowClan leader. "I was hoping that us and our deputies could speak in private. I came to discuss a sensitive matter."

Frostpaw saw a somewhat amused expression creep across Sedgestar's face.

"I know this may come as a surprise to you because I am aware of ShadowClan's secretive reputation among the other clans," Sedgestar said, his whiskers twitching slightly. "But, we are only reserved with outsiders. Within this camp, there are no secrets among my warriors."

Sedgestar inclined his head towards the Oak Tree.

"But, we may go speak in my den, if it makes you more comfortable. Just know that as soon as you're gone, my clan will hear about all that's transpired," Sedgestar said.

Morningstar's ears twitched back in a displeased expression, but the ThunderClan leader did not move towards the den.

"Very well then," Morningstar rumbled. "We can speak here."

Sedgestar took a seat on the damp earth in the center of camp, nodding for Morningstar to continue. ThunderClan's grey leader took a deep breath.

"I will not mince words. I came to ask if ShadowClan will aid ThunderClan in our fight against SkyClan," Morningstar growled.

Frostpaw's eyes widened in surprise. *SkyClan.* But, her surprise quickly soured to fear, and she felt a river of cold run through her as the recent memory of Paledusk at the gathering flashed in her mind. Frostpaw glanced around the camp. She saw her emotions of surprise reflected back to her on her clan-mate's faces, but they didn't look as frightened as she felt. Frostpaw gave her pelt a small shake, trying to shake away the memory of Paledusk's fierce and cruel eyes, as ShadowClan waited in silence for Sedgestar to respond.

Sedgestar tilted his head, his smooth expression and calm amber

eyes giving no hint of his thoughts away.

"I mean no offense to ThunderClan when I say this," Sedgestar meowed in an even voice. "But, why should ShadowClan help you? I must think of my clan-mates health and safety before those of ThunderClan's. Why should I put my cats at risk for ThunderClan's sake?"

"SkyClan has been threatening my clan for moons now," Morningstar said with a growl. "They hunt on our land, raid our camp. They are relentless. If left unchecked, they may very well come for ShadowClan next. You are shortsighted if you believe that they are only a threat to ThunderClan."

Frostpaw's brow furrowed as she recalled Grovepelt's words from a few training sessions ago that distance meant nothing to a power-hungry cat.

But, Grovepelt and Sedgestar do realized they could be a threat!

Frostpaw saw a few of her clan-mates shift in anger at the "shortsighted" insult, and she even saw Dampfang across camp bare his teeth. Still, Sedgestar's expression gave nothing of his emotions away.

"Why come to us though?" Sedgestar said smoothly. "If SkyClan is such a threat, surely RiverClan, who also shares borders with them, would be more willing to help you. Or, even WindClan perhaps?"

Morningstar snorted.

"WindClan is more likely to grow wings and learn to fly than to help us," he rumbled. "Remember, we went to war with them only a few seasons ago, during leaf-bare. Rabbitstar has not forgotten that so quickly. As, for RiverClan, I already spoke with Willowstar. She will do nothing. She says that she doesn't think SkyClan is a threat, and that we are exaggerating our claims about them. I suspect that she has made some sort of truce with them."

The ThunderClan leader had started pacing agitatedly, his tail lashing and his fur rising on his shoulders.

"I think SkyClan promised her hunting rights on both sides of the river if they take our territory, and we get driven out of the forest," Morningstar said, closing his eyes for a moment as he gave a bitter growl.

"Do you think that's what SkyClan is trying to do?" Sedgestar asked, his eyes flashing sharply. "Drive you out?"

Morningstar shook his head. His fur flattened and his shoulders sagged. The large grey leader suddenly looked much smaller. He gazed hollowly down at the ground.

"I don't know. It seems like it though. You know that the last leaf-bare the forest experienced was the longest and coldest memory. ThunderClan made it through, but only barely. But, since SkyClan has been at our throats for moons now, we haven't been able to recover. We should be fat and sleek in the height of green-leaf, but look at us. We look like half-starved rats. We don't have the strength to drive back SkyClan alone," Morningstar mumbled.

Frostpaw's eyes widened in shock at Morningstar's brutal honesty.

Sedgestar would never dream of admitting such weakness in the middle of an enemy camp!

Frostpaw's gaze flickered to Acornear for a moment, as she wondered what he thought of his leader's admittance, but the deputy said nothing. He simply stood at his leader's side, his brow furrowed and his jaw set. Morningstar's gaze rose back to Sedgestar's.

"Please Sedgestar. I know you are an honorable cat, and you won't fall to Fennelstar's silver-tongue as Willowstar has," Morningstar said, his deep voice imploring. "ThunderClan needs your help to battle SkyClan, before it's too late for us. We still have a couple moons of green-leaf left, if StarClan is good and the frost doesn't come early this year and scare all the prey to their burrows... With the might of fearsome ShadowClan with us, SkyClan will be forced back behind their borders, and we will be able to access our best hunting-grounds again. And, ThunderClan will be able to recover before leaf-bare comes. But, if not... I fear ThunderClan will have to

leave the forest. Or, else die here in the snow."

Total silence had fallen over the cats, and Sedgestar was silent too, his tail swishing thoughtfully behind him. Frostpaw bit the inside of her cheek, anticipating nipping at her as her thoughts whirled anxiously. As the silence wore on, Morningstar met Sedgestar's gaze evenly, and Frostpaw saw some strength return to the ThunderClan leader's eyes.

"There is something else you should know," Morningstar said so quietly, Frostpaw had to strain her ears to hear him. "If you choose not to help us... I cannot promise that our borders will remain peaceful anymore."

Frostpaw flattened her ears. She sensed the mood of the ShadowClan cats around her shift dramatically as everyone tensed up in the face of the threat. Frostpaw saw the hackles on Sedgestar start to rise.

"This is not a threat," Morningstar meowed quickly. "But, I don't know if I can keep my authority when my cats begin starving. They will do whatever it takes to survive. Surely, you must understand that?"

Frostpaw saw Sedgestar give a single nod, flattening his hackles, and the camp relaxed somewhat.

Sedgestar shifted and rose to his paws.

"Thank you for telling me this," Sedgestar said. "I will think on what you've said here, consult with our ancestors, as well as my deputy and medicine cats, then send word, letting you know of my decision in no more than a quarter of a moon."

"Mouse-dung. Why do you need to wait and consult our ancestors?" Acornear snapped, speaking up for the first time. "You think there's any chance StarClan approves of an entire clan being driven out?"

"Enough Acornear," Morningstar said, but Frostpaw thought he sounded more resigned than angry.

Morningstar dipped his head to Sedgestar.

"A quarter moon is fair. We will eagerly await your response," he meowed.

Sedgestar nodded.

"Darkpelt and Rowanheart can escort you to the border," Sedgestar said.

Acornear gave a soft growl at the mention of an escort, but he didn't say anything more. The ThunderClan cats left camp with the two warriors flanking them. Once the bramble tunnel stopped shaking, and the ThunderClan scent in the air was fading, the camp exploded into conversation. Autumnpaw came bounding over to Pinepaw and Frostpaw, a whirlwind of auburn and white fur.

"Can you believe it?" he asked, his eyes gleaming in excitement. "ThunderClan's leader, in our camp, *begging* for our help!"

"What do you think we should do?" Frostpaw asked, shifting on her paws anxiously.

Her stomach twisted. She felt too overwhelmed by the moral dilemma Morningstar proposed to find the fact that the ThunderClan leader was in their camp exciting.

Will we help them? It would be wrong to let them all die right? But, the warrior code says we should defend our clan above all else... And, if fighting SkyClan with ThunderClan will put us in danger, then maybe we shouldn't do it...?

Then an image of Paledusk began to take shape in her mind again; his sleek-furred white pelt forming slowly as if he was emerging from dense swirling fog. Frostpaw could almost sense his cold green gaze on her. His voice snarling *'any tragedies that befall ShadowClan will be all your fault'* echoed in her ears, and she shuddered.

I'm not sure what ShadowClan should do. But, I would fear any Clan that has Paledusk as their deputy. Is Fennelstar like that too? Is all of SkyClan?

Autumnpaw shrugged, bringing Frostpaw back to the present.

"I don't know. That's up to Sedgestar to decide, right?" he said, but his eyes flashed as he took the worry in Frostpaw's expression.

"Hey! Don't worry; it'll be okay," he said, giving her shoulder a gentle nudge with his muzzle. "Sedgestar will know what's best."

Frostpaw just nodded mutely.

"I don't know if we should help them," Pinepaw said, her eyes wide and serious. "If SkyClan is so much of a threat, and ThunderClan might be threatening at our border soon, we should be preparing ourselves to defend our territory from both them and SkyClan."

Frostpaw's tail twitched, and her brow furrowed, uncertain if ShadowClan could really stand against them both. But, before she could say anything in response, the voices around her got louder and louder as her ears were bombarded by fragments of conversation.

"Why should we go to battle for them?" Marshnose yowled out.

"I don't care if ThunderClan starves," Dampfang snorted.

"But, what kind of cats would we be if we just stood aside and let them all die?" Emberflower challenged, her green eyes flashing.

"We must put the good of ShadowClan before everyone else," Swoopstrike growled, rising to his paws and lashing his tail.

"Quiet!" Sedgestar called, his voice cutting through all the others.

The light brown tabby still stood in the center of camp, his long tail held high. Everyone turned to look at him.

"What do you think we should do, Sedgestar?" Weaseltail called out, looking expectingly at their leader.

Frostpaw padded closer towards the center of the camp to hear better. She noticed other cats doing the same, and soon all of ShadowClan was grouped tightly around Sedgestar and Grovepelt. Frostpaw ended up nestled next to Redclaw and Leafbreeze as they waited for him to respond.

"I... am not sure, to be honest," Sedgestar admitted, his tail lowering to swish uncertainly behind him. "While I agree with Morningstar that SkyClan is a threat, I'm not sure we should put our lives at risk to help ThunderClan."

Voices again rose up all around Frostpaw, clamoring for their opinion to be heard over the others.

"Shh!" Grovepelt hissed, his tail twitching in irritation. "I know you all have a lot of thoughts, but one at a time!"

Grovepelt turned to look at Sedgestar, and the old tom's eyes gleamed with an idea.

"Perhaps a council is in order?" Grovepelt asked.

The cats around Frostpaw began to murmur. Frostpaw's brow furrowed in confusion.

"What's a council?" she whispered into Redclaw's ear.

"It's kind of like a clan meeting, but every cat older than a kit gets to say their turn," Redclaw murmured back. "It's a very old tradition. The stories go it extends all the way back to the creation of ShadowClan and our clan's first leader."

Frostpaw's eyes went wide with interest.

All the way back to the very beginning?

"ShadowClan cats have always had an independent streak, I guess," Redclaw said with a somewhat amused shrug. "And, have always wanted their thoughts to be heard."

"Good idea," Sedgestar said with a nod to Grovepelt. "We will hold a council."

Sedgestar turned and pushed his way out of the crowd of cats, bounding up Clanrock. There was no need for him to call the clan because everyone, besides Darkpelt and Rowanheart, were already out in camp.

"I will speak first," Sedgestar said, sitting on Clanrock and wrapping his tail around his paws. "Then the medicine cats and Grovepelt. Then the elders. Then the senior warriors, and then the rest of the warriors. And, finally the apprentices."

Sedgestar looked around at the crowd.

"Anyone older than six moons who wants to speak on this topic may, but you don't have to," he continued. "And, when someone else is talking, there will be *no* interrupting them. Rest assured, everyone will have a turn to voice their opinion. Now, everyone, gather close so you can be heard."

The clan settled down in a semi-circle around Clanrock. Frostpaw sat close to Redclaw. She glanced over at her face, wondering what the queen thought about ThunderClan. Redclaw's expression was uncertain, but she gazed at Sedgestar steadily like she was drawing confidence from him. Sedgestar cleared his throat before beginning.

"I feel undecided about if we should help ThunderClan in their fight against SkyClan," Sedgestar said. "While I pity their plight and think that SkyClan could be a threat to ShadowClan in the future, they are not a threat now, and I value the safety of our clan more than the safety of ThunderClan."

Sedgestar dipped his head towards Clearstream, who was sitting at the base of Clanrock, near the fern-framed entrance of her den.

"Clearstream, you may go if you wish," Sedgestar said.

The fluffy grey tabby rose to her paws.

"I think we should travel to the Moonstone and consult with StarClan before making any definite decision," Clearstream meowed, her blue eyes troubled. "I do think Acornear is right that StarClan would never want a clan to be driven from the forest, but our ancestors may be able to show us better way to solve this problem that doesn't involve ShadowClan going to battle."

Sedgestar nodded approvingly.

"That is wise. If there is a solution that doesn't cause ShadowClan

blood to spill, we should try to find it," he meowed.

His gaze flickered to Elmclaw. The large, dark tabby rose to his paws as his mentor took a seat.

"We are strong and healthy now in green-leaf and our herb stocks are overflowing," Elmclaw said, his voice a low rumble. "If SkyClan may be a threat in the future, say, after they drive ThunderClan out, we would be much more ill-equipped to battle them without allies, in leaf-fall or leaf-bare, weakened by sickness or hunger, than we would be now."

"Elmclaw! We're healers not fighters," Clearstream hissed, her voice slightly scolding.

Elmclaw's ears flattened.

"I'm not saying ShadowClan *should* go to battle," he rumbled. "Just pointing out the fact that if we did, it would be easiest on the clan to do it now. Not later."

Elmclaw took a seat, and Clearstream gazed at him with a furrowed brow.

"Thank you, Elmclaw," Sedgestar said. "That is a good point."

Grovepelt rose to his feet without prompting.

"I say we should fight," the deputy said without hesitation.

Frostpaw's eyes widened in surprise. While she knew Grovepelt had valiantly fought in numerous battles throughout his life, he had still always seemed more of a pacifist than an aggressor to her.

"SkyClan needs to be taught a lesson. They seem to have no respect for our ancestors or our traditions," Grovepelt continued. "There have always been five clans in the forest, and there always will be. And, if we don't act now, there's no telling what SkyClan may do to us next."

Grovepelt took a seat, and Sedgestar nodded.

"Thank you, Grovepelt. The elders may go now," Sedgestar said.

Greytail and Flymask were staunchly against battle, seeing no need to interfere with ThunderClan's problems, while Treefur was undecided. Sedgestar then moved on to the senior warriors, who's opinions were mixed. Emberflower, Dustleap, Weaseltail, and Larkfoot thought ShadowClan should fight. Dawntail, Marshnose, and Fogfur thought ShadowClan shouldn't. Redclaw, after a long pause of hesitation, also put her support with the anti-battle group, shooting an apologetic look at her mate Weaseltail as she did so. Kestrelmoon and Amberberry refrained from commenting. Sedgestar then moved on to the younger warriors. Swoopstrike was the first to rise to his paws, beating out Dampfang, who had risen to a half crouch and shot Swoopstrike a scorching look for stiffing him.

"ShadowClan has always protected their own above all else," Swoopstrike said, his voice ringing confidently throughout the camp. "Not only is this what the warrior code commands us to do; our devotion to this creed is what makes us strong; stronger than all the other Clans. We are truly independent and always have been. We shouldn't help ThunderClan."

Frostpaw shifted on her paws. She felt like Swoopstrike made a decent point.

Dampfang was now on his feet. Frostpaw rolled her eyes. He seemed determined to speak next even though there were plenty of other warriors older than him who had not yet had a turn.

"ShadowClan shouldn't fight," Dampfang said definitively. "If SkyClan is going to drive out ThunderClan; let them do it. We will be able to stand against SkyClan alone if we need to fight them later. Plus, once ThunderClan is gone, and SkyClan has weakened themselves by fighting them off, we can move in on the old ThunderClan territory, and secure more hunting grounds for ourselves. There's no need for SkyClan to take it all."

Dampfang's propositions got a few murmurs of approval from Marshnose, Flymask and Hootflight. Frostpaw's brow furrowed, her ears twitching back.

Dampfang just sees this as an opportunity to exploit another Clan's weakness. He doesn't understand how risky it would be for ShadowClan if SkyClan was strong enough to drive ThunderClan away.

Frostpaw's gaze flickered up to Sedgestar, but he didn't respond to Dampfang's proposal, his expression unreadable.

Snakeeyes went next. She had been sitting in front of the nursery to make sure her kits stayed inside, but now she rose to her paws and strode over to the semi-circle of cats.

"ShadowClan should fight SkyClan now, when we have the chance to do battle outside of our territory, rather than waiting and risking an invasion," Snakeeyes said, her blue-and-green gaze startlingly intense as she swept it over the crowd and brought it up to Sedgestar. "I will not put the lives of my kits at risk by waiting until SkyClan attacks our camp in a couple of moons. We need to strike now, preemptively."

Sedgestar bowed his head to Snakeeyes.

"Good point," he meowed. "Thank you."

Snakeeyes headed back towards the nursery. Dappledtail, Dewleaf, and Beeclaw ended up supporting Snakeeyes' decision to fight, while Hootflight and Thornheart wanted not to. Leafbreeze didn't comment. And, finally Sedgestar turned his attention onto the apprentices.

"Would any apprentices like to speak?" he asked, his tone slightly warmer as he looked down at the young cats.

Frostpaw gazed around at her wide-eyed den-mates. It felt foreign for them to even be invited to share their opinions. Apprentices were normally expected to watch and learn from the older cats, not to speak up about their thoughts. It seemed that the other apprentices felt the same way, since they all just shifted their weight on their paws, gazing at each other like they were trying to figure out what everyone else would do.

Frostpaw blinked in surprise to find herself rising to her feet, and

seemingly without realizing it, she was now standing and everyone was staring at her. Frostpaw froze under the paralyzing cold of their many gazes, her blue eyes wide as moons.

"Yes, Frostpaw?" Sedgestar asked, yanking her attention away from the numerous eyes of the clan and freeing her from their paralysis.

Sedgestar blinked kindly down at her. Frostpaw swallowed hard and forced herself to speak.

"I—I think we should fight," Frostpaw said, her voice barely above a squeak in volume and wavering.

Her mouth was suddenly dry. Frostpaw paused for a moment to lick her lips, trying to make her voice work again. As she hesitated, an image of Paledusk's cold green eyes formed in her mind.

"SkyClan is a threat to us," she said, her voice becoming a bit louder and more certain. "Look at their pattern of behavior against ThunderClan. They won't stop once ThunderClan is gone. But—but —"

Frostpaw swallowed as her tongue tripped over itself, but she closed her eyes for a moment and forced the rest of the words out.

"But, I'm sure we can beat them easily with ThunderClan's help," she said. "Without ThunderClan's help though... it seems much harder."

"Of course the rogue thinks we should fight!" Dampfang hissed in a hushed voice across camp as soon as the last words left her mouth. *"She doesn't care if ShadowClan lives are lost! She doesn't have a whisker of loyalty to us."*

Frostpaw's ears flattened, and her pelt burnt hot with anger and shame.

I can't believe that Dampfang just said that about me in front of the whole clan!

"Silence!" Sedgestar snapped, his amber gaze glowering down at Dampfang. "I thought my instructions were clear, Dampfang! Every *ShadowClan cat* over the age of six moons is allowed to speak

without interruption!"

"But, she was done talking!" Dampfang protested, his green eyes glaring back at Sedgestar.

Frostpaw dug her claws into the ground, staring down at her feet.

"That's not for you to decide," Sedgestar rumbled, his eyes narrowing. "Now put a mouse in it, or if you can't follow simple instructions, you'll have to go to sit in the nursery with the kits."

Frostpaw's gaze flickered up to see Dampfang's muzzle wrinkled in fury, but he clenched his jaw shut.

At least Sedgestar defended me.

As the leader turned his attention back to Frostpaw, she quickly sat, gazing back down at her feet.

"Any other apprentices?" Sedgestar meowed, his gaze flickering around them.

There was a long pause as no one moved, like the awkwardness in the air after Dampfang's outburst and argument with Sedgestar was too heavy to fight against. But, finally Autumnpaw rose to his paws. Frostpaw breathed a sigh of relief that Dampfang's insult against her wouldn't be the closing note of the council, and the thing that stuck in all of her clan-mates minds.

"I'm with Frostpaw. It makes more sense for us to fight now," Autumnpaw said concisely, his chin raised with confidence.

Pinepaw was rising to her paws as Autumnpaw was sitting. Frostpaw had to flatten a reflexive bristling of her fur. She already knew that Pinepaw disagreed with her, but she just hoped that she wouldn't pile on with Dampfang's insults against her.

Once Pinepaw was on her feet, stretched up to her full height, she hesitated for a heart-beat before beginning.

"Before you called this council, I didn't think we should fight," Pinepaw said, her voice clear and steady. "But, after hearing

everyone speak about it, I've changed my mind. Frostpaw makes a good point. Fennelstar does have a pattern of exploiting ThunderClan whenever he can. SkyClan doesn't have a grudge against them or anything like that; they just see them as a good target, which is enough of a motivation for them to attack. And, of course, ShadowClan isn't weak, but if ThunderClan is gone, I think we will become that next target, and it will force us into war whether we like it or not. And, as my mentor told us once during training: Aggression is like fire; it consumes in all directions. SkyClan is a threat not just to ThunderClan, but to us as well."

Frostpaw's eyes were wide with shock as Pinepaw sat, her speech done. The spiky black-furred she-cat had somehow managed to say everything she had wanted to say, but in a way much better than she had. Frostpaw shook her head incredulously.

Frostpaw's gaze flickered over to look at Grovepelt, and she saw the deputy's chin raised in pride, his green gaze shimmering as he looked at his apprentice.

"Well said Pinepaw," Grovepelt meowed, while Sedgestar nodded.

Mosspaw rose to her paws next, but the normally bubbly apprentice looked uncertain as the clan's attention shifted to her.

"Is SkyClan really all that bad? At the gathering I've spoken to some of them, and they seemed okay..." Mosspaw's voice trailed off, and she shrugged before sitting, her brow furrowed.

No other apprentices stood to take her place.

"Thank you Mosspaw. Alright, then," Sedgestar said. "This concludes this council. Thank you all. You have given me much to consider. But, I will still journey to the Moonstone and speak with our ancestors before making announcing my final decision."

Clearstream rose to her paws.

"The half-moon is in three days. You can join me and Elmclaw going there, if you like," she said.

Sedgestar bowed his head gratefully to Clearstream.

"I would appreciate that, thank you," he meowed.

Sedgestar bounded down from Clanrock, and cats began to disperse. Frostpaw padded over in Autumnpaw's direction, who saw her coming, and then flicked his tail towards Pinepaw to indicate he was heading towards her. As Frostpaw walked up to the siblings, Autumnpaw turned to Pinepaw.

"I thought you thought we shouldn't fight?" he said, his voice teasing.

Pinepaw shrugged, the fur on her shoulders bristling out a bit defensively.

"I changed my mind. Is that a crime?" she snapped, glaring at him.

Autumnpaw took a pace back from her, adverting his gaze as if to pacify her.

"Relax, Pinepaw. I was just teasing. I'm glad you're on our side. And, that you came to your senses for once," he said, his amber eyes glinting, seemingly unable to resist a final jab.

Pinepaw glared at him again, but Frostpaw stepped in before the bickering could turn into a real fight.

"You spoke very well," Frostpaw meowed, before glancing down at her paws as a wave of hot embarrassment came over her as she relived her stuttering speech and Dampfang's jeers. "Grovepelt looked like he was very proud of you."

"Really?" Pinepaw said, sitting up a bit straighter, and twisting her head around to search for Grovepelt in the crowd.

It wasn't Grovepelt she spotted though, instead the large, fluffy black-and-white form of Poolpaw was bounding over to them.

"Great, look what you frog-brains have done now; we're going to be trapped in a war between two clans!" Poolpaw said, his tail flicking behind him.

"We don't know that yet," Frostpaw cautioned. "Sedgestar still has to

make up his mind."

"Besides, don't blame us!" Autumnpaw protested, frowning at Poolpaw. "We're only apprentices! Our opinions to Sedgestar probably weigh as much as a piece of prey begging for its life."

"Yeah, if you want to be mad at anyone, blame the warriors. Or, Grovepelt," Pinepaw said, tossing her head with a huff.

Poolpaw playfully shoved Pinepaw.

"But, I can't call Grovepelt a frog-brain!" Poolpaw said with a purr.

She shoved him back. Harder.

"Keep your paws off me you great oaf!" she sniffed. "And, you can't call us frog-brains either!"

"Make me!" Poolpaw said, grappling Pinepaw with his big paws.

Autumnpaw purred loudly as Pinepaw squeaked in protest, writhing to try to get away from her brother while Poolpaw wrapped his forepaws tightly around her, trapping Pinepaw as his long, thick pelt enveloped her. Autumnpaw leaned in close to Frostpaw.

"It looks like his fur is eating her!" he said, managing to get the words out between the vibrating purrs that shook his shoulders.

Frostpaw purred back, and she felt her worries about the potential war melt away, at least for the moment. Still stuck in her brother's vice-like embrace, Frostpaw saw Pinepaw's desperate amber eyes seek out Frostpaw's from the thick tuffs of black-and-white fur pressed against her face.

"Don't just stand their like a sleepy dormouse! Help me!" Pinepaw called.

"Nuh-huh! This is between me and Pinepaw!" Poolpaw declared. "Asking for help is cheating!"

Ignoring him, Frostpaw sprung at Poolpaw with a playful growl, wrapping her paws around his neck to try to drag him away from

Pinepaw. Poolpaw shook his shoulders, trying to dislodge her.

"Cheaters! You pair of snake-hearts!" Poolpaw wailed dramatically.

Frostpaw purred as Poolpaw buckled under her, and while he was distracted by Frostpaw clinging to him, Pinepaw managed to wiggle out of his grip.

"You should listen more during training, Poolpaw!" Pinepaw said, now a safe distance away from her brother's reach. "It's not cheating! ShadowClan's greatest strength comes from the element of surprise!"

Dampfang padded past the apprentices, letting out a huff of derision at their play-fighting. Frostpaw felt a tightness suddenly filled her belly like a rock had been dropped into her stomach. The insult and embarrassment she felt during the council rushed back over her. Frostpaw let go of Poolpaw, scrambling away from him and swiping her tongue across her chest fur self-consciously. Poolpaw whirled back towards her with a playful growl, but stopped when he saw her expression. Autumnpaw padded over to Frostpaw, head-butting her shoulder.

"Ignore that frog-brain," Autumnpaw said with a soft growl. "You heard what Sedgestar said. Everyone knows you're a ShadowClan cat through and through. No one takes Dampfang seriously."

"Really? You think so?" Frostpaw murmured, glancing up at him.

Autumnpaw nodded, and Poolpaw nodded along with him.

"Yeah. Dampfang has bees in his brain," Pinepaw added, a growl in her voice, and Frostpaw's gaze flew to hers in surprise.

Pinepaw was watching Frostpaw steadily. Frostpaw purred quietly in response, feeling a flicker of warmth inside her.

"But, speaking of ShadowClan through and through..." Autumnpaw said, a playful glint reapplying in his eyes.

Autumnpaw sprung at Pinepaw without warning, bowling her over and pinning her to the ground.

"You smelly frog-face! What was that for?!" Pinepaw spat from the ground.

"Weren't you just saying? Never underestimate the element of surprise!" Autumnpaw declared, dramatically puffing his chest out.

"You're a frog-brain," Pinepaw growled, but there wasn't any venom in her voice as she batted at Autumnpaw's face with her paws.

Autumnpaw ducked her blows.

"You maniac! Are you trying to blind me?" he wailed.

"Oh *shut up!* You're such a kit! My claws aren't even out!"

Rotten Pines

In the days following ThunderClan's visit, Frostpaw tried to keep her mind focused on her training, but she found herself distracted. Swoopstrike kept snarling at her for her clumsy pounces, and near-misses while hunting, but try as she might, Frostpaw couldn't get thoughts of ThunderClan and SkyClan out of her head. She felt like she was tangled up so much from the indecision and worry in her mind that she couldn't concentrate on anything else. Luckily though, the night of the half-moon had finally come and gone. Now they just had to wait for Sedgestar, Clearstream, and Elmclaw to return to camp and announce what StarClan had told them. Then Sedgestar would tell everyone his decision about ThunderClan, and Frostpaw could stop worrying about it.

Frostpaw shook her head like she was trying to shake the buzzing thoughts from her mind. It was already sun-high, so Sedgestar and the medicine cats should arrive back in camp at any moment. The clan was well aware of this, so everyone was out in the clearing, waiting for their leader's arrival and enjoying the pleasant day.

Frostpaw and Autumnpaw were lying out in a pool of sunshine near the apprentice's den. Autumnpaw's amber eyes kept lazily drifting shut, but Frostpaw would snap him back awake with a flick of her tail on his side, reluctant to be left alone with her anxious thoughts.

"What do you think Sedgestar's going to say?" Frostpaw asked.

"I've already told you a hundred times— I don't know," Autumnpaw sighed, some exasperation in his voice. "Why does helping or not helping ThunderClan bother you so much anyway?"

Frostpaw shuffled her paws uncomfortably.

It's not ThunderClan that bothers me. It's SkyClan.

But, she didn't respond to him.

Autumnpaw studied her quietly before sitting up.

"Well, since it seems like I won't be getting a nap in, we can at least talk about it," he said.

"No... it's fine. I'm sorry, I can let you sleep," Frostpaw muttered, looking away from him and staring down at her paws instead.

Autumnpaw scooted over to her, so close their sides brushed, but Frostpaw still didn't glance over at him. Ever so slowly, Autumnpaw's face edged into the corners of Frostpaw's vision, moving closer and closer to the center of her gaze, until Autumnpaw was practically resting his chin on her paws, gazing up at her with exaggeratedly wide, imploring eyes. Unable to keep a straight face any longer, a purr burst from Frostpaw's throat, and she playfully shoved Autumnpaw away.

"Alright, alright. Stop looking at me like that," she said.

Autumnpaw purred back, his amber eyes shining playfully.

"Only if you tell me what's wrong," he said, mockingly threatening.

Frostpaw shuffled her paws again, her laughter fading to be replaced by anxiety again.

"But, I don't know what's wrong. I'm just worried," Frostpaw admitted.

Autumnpaw tilted his head at her.

"Are you worried about the fighting? We've been in battles and border scraps before," Autumnpaw said softly. "It'll be fine."

"It's not that," Frostpaw said, sighing as she rested her chin down on her paws. "I'm not worried about fighting... it's this whole thing that feels bad... Like there's something more that's going on with SkyClan and ThunderClan than what we know about... And, SkyClan... scares me."

Autumnpaw gently rested his tail on her back.

"Is it because Paledusk was mean to you last Gathering?" he said, his mew quiet.

Frostpaw flinched slightly, her ears growing hot in embarrassment.

He must think I'm such a dumb kit, being scared of Paledusk!

"Partly," Frostpaw mumbled into her paws. "You didn't see what he was like. He was... I don't know, just so... Ugh, anyway, forget it. I'm just being dumb."

"I don't think you're dumb. I think you're one of the smartest cat I know," Autumnpaw said earnestly.

Frostpaw glanced over at him out of the corner of her eye. He was gazing very seriously at her for a moment before the look melted away like morning fog burnt off by the midday sun, being replaced with a more standard-Autumnpaw, amiable expression.

"Thanks," Frostpaw said, looking away from him.

"I'm also worried about if allying with ThunderClan will cause a war with us and SkyClan. They seem pretty relentless if they've managed to make things so bad with ThunderClan. And, what if SkyClan has RiverClan help like Morningstar fears?" Frostpaw continued.

"But, we will have ThunderClan on our side then too," Autumnpaw pointed out. "It'll still be two against two. Unless SkyClan and RiverClan want to go traipsing through twoleg-place, or take a convoluted route through WindClan, they will have to travel through ThunderClan territory to attack us. And, I don't think ThunderClan will like that."

"Unless they go through Four-trees," Frostpaw said, her tail-twitching worriedly.

"Alright, fine, you have a point," Autumnpaw conceded. "But, what's the use in worrying about that now? We don't even know yet if Sedgestar has decided to help ThunderClan."

Frostpaw groaned.

"Not helping ThunderClan is worse! I have even more worries about that," Frostpaw lamented.

Autumnpaw swiped his tongue over her ears reassuringly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to stress you out more!" Autumnpaw meowed.

"It's not your fault," Frostpaw said, making herself lift her chin up off her paws and sit up a bit. "I think I'll feel at least a bit better once Sedgestar makes an announcement about it. It's this waiting part that's killing me and making my worries go wild with 'what if's.'"

"That makes sense," Autumnpaw meowed.

Frostpaw saw his gaze was getting sleepy again; his eyelids drifting down to be half-lidded as he was lulled towards slumber from the gentle warmth of the sun above them. Frostpaw's pelt was comfortably toasty from the light too, but she still didn't feel quite comfortable enough to sleep.

"Everything will work out though," Autumnpaw mumbled sleepily. "I'm sure ShadowClan has made it through much worse than this."

Autumnpaw's chin rested on her back.

"I'm just gonna rest my eyes... for a bit... wake me up if you need anything..."

In only a few heartbeats, Autumnpaw was snoring lightly.

Frostpaw sighed softly. She wished she could join him in sleep, if only to forget her worries for a while, but her anxious thoughts nettled her like a burr. She kept shooting glances at the thorn barrier, waiting for Sedgestar to come through it, and her stomach rumbled in hunger every few moments too. She had a miserable hunt this morning with Swoopstrike, having been too distracted to catch anything. So, she hadn't been allowed to take anything from the fresh-kill pile. She was going on another hunt after sun-high, and hopefully that one would go better than earlier...

Frostpaw sighed, resting her chin on her paws. She pulled her gaze

off the barrier to glance at Autumnpaw's dark red-furred side, relaxing herself by watching his flank rise and fall at a comfortingly regular rhythm.

She may have dozed off for a moment, because the next thing Frostpaw knew, she heard the barrier rustling. Frostpaw's ears pricked, and she lifted her head, watching as Sedgestar, Clearstream and Elmclaw came streaming in. Their faces were solemn, and Frostpaw felt her stomach flip in worry as she studied their expressions. She prodded Autumnpaw awake.

"They're back," she whispered, as he lifted his head, blinking blearily.

Autumnpaw rubbed his face with a paw, yawning as he watched the group trek across the clearing. Sedgestar headed straight for Clanrock, scaling it in two bounds, while the medicine cats sat at its base. Sedgestar settled down on the boulder, sitting and wrapping his tail around his paws.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for a clan meeting," Sedgestar said, his voice clear but not as loud as his call normally was.

Frostpaw's brow was furrowed in concern as she sat and turned to face the Clanrock. A few cats emerged from the dens, and everyone grouped in the clearing.

"What news did StarClan share?" Larkfoot asked, her voice eager as their clan-mates finished settling down and everyone gazed up at Sedgestar.

Sedgestar's ear twitched.

"The message I received from our ancestors wasn't clear..." he began slowly, his gaze filtering over the crowd.

His face was creased, and he shifted his weight like the announcement was making him uneasy. Frostpaw's stomach clenched. Sedgestar was normally so smooth and composed, but right now he seemed almost... off balance.

Did something horrible happen?

"Clearstream, Elmclaw and I all received the same dream from StarClan," Sedgestar continued before hesitating and glancing a Clearstream. "Would you like to tell them what happened?"

Clearstream daintily rose to her paws, her long grey-tabby fur looking as smooth and serene as ever, but her face was troubled.

"We spoke with Shadowstar, the first leader of ShadowClan," she said.

There were gasps and murmurs from the clan. Frostpaw's pelt prickled in awe and surprise, and her eyes stretched wide.

Did they really see the very first leader of ShadowClan? But, she must have lived so long ago?

Frostpaw felt a flicker of doubt. She knew that the medicine cats went to the Moonstone every half-moon, and that they received prophecies and omens from StarClan, and that the leaders supposedly had nine lives gifted to them from their ancestors... But, could it all be true? Frostpaw had never seen the ancestors herself. She'd never seen Sedgestar die, then come back to life. But, everyone else, from every clan in the whole forest, was full of so much conviction about it. Sedgestar was even using StarClan's opinion to weigh going to war. The medicine cats and leaders couldn't be making it all up. And, what about the storm that broke up the last gathering? Surely it was divine intervention and not just a coincidental change in weather... right?

Frostpaw was pulled back out of her thoughts as Clearstream continued.

"Shadowstar reminded me of the dream that I had during last leaf-bare about the owl and our clan-mates around me in the snow. She told us that as long as ShadowClan's clan-bond is strong, and we rely on each other, we can withstand anything. Like a sturdy pine standing tall and steady in the grip of a hurricane," Clearstream said.

"Well that sounds pretty clear to me!" Marshnose voice rose out of the crowd. "We need to stand alone! StarClan doesn't want us meddling in other cat's affairs!"

There were some murmurs of agreement with Marshnose.

"...But, that wasn't the whole dream," Clearstream muttered, her tail swishing slowly.

"Go on," Sedgestar said with a nod, his face grim. "Tell them."

Clearstream took a deep breath.

"After she said that, Shadowstar warned that although we have that strength, we must also be wary of hidden diseases. There are pines that may look strong and solid from the outside, but be rotting within and liable to collapse at any moment. Even from the faintest breeze," Clearstream said in a low voice.

Frostpaw's fur down her spine stood on end at the graveness of Clearstream's words, and concerned whispers rose from the crowd. She found her gaze flickering to Autumnpaw's, and was grateful when his familiar amber eyes met hers, even if he also looked frightened. Frostpaw's gaze flickered away from him to search Swoopstrike out in the crowd. Her mentor's jaw was set, and he was gazing up at Sedgestar with a fierce intensity, like he was ready to go to battle with whatever threatened ShadowClan at this very moment.

"What does it mean?"

It was Greytail's rasping voice that finally rose up. She was seated next to the other elders outside of their den. Clearstream shook her head.

"I don't know," she meowed.

Greytail's frail face furrowed in deep concern.

"Yet," Clearstream added quickly. "Clearly StarClan is giving us some kind of advice, or warning, but of what, I can't say yet."

Elmclaw rose to his feet.

"Can I give my interpretation?" he asked, and Clearstream nodded at him to continue.

Elmclaw turned to face the clan, the massive tabby dwarfing his mentor at his side.

"I think Shadowstar is warning us against appearances. SkyClan maybe doesn't seem like much of a threat to us right now, yes. But, I think they may be the 'hidden disease' that Shadowstar is referring," Elmclaw meowed in his deep voice.

"It's possible..." Clearstream muttered, her blue eyes troubled.

"Or, could it be an actual disease that is coming?" Dawntail said, her eyes wide with concern.

"Or, what about a traitor!" Dampfang yowled, shooting a brief, burning glance at Frostpaw.

Frostpaw dug her claws into the ground, hot anger starting to burn in her chest. Noise exploded in the camp as everyone tried to shout what they thought the warning might mean at the same time. Sedgestar waved his tail for silence.

"Enough. Enough!" he yowled until quiet settled over the camp again.

Sedgestar swept his gaze over the clan.

"None of us know what Shadowstar's words mean right now. But, regardless, we can't just idly sit in our nests, tail-wringing until StarClan sends us another sign. We must take action," Sedgestar said. "So, I have made up my mind. ShadowClan will help ThunderClan."

There were a few yowls of protest, but Sedgestar silenced them with a glare from his sharp amber eyes.

"Believe me, I do not make this choice lightly. I took all of the thoughts each of you brought up into account before doing so. And,

I intend to only help them on a condition. I will not help ThunderClan if they will not agree to help us in return. It is only fair," Sedgestar said. "But, my decision on this is final."

There were still a few murmurs of dissent, but they were quiet this time and faded rapidly as the clan swiftly fell in line behind their leader.

"I will tell Morningstar of my decision shortly, and if he agrees to my terms, then I will have more information for you all about what to expect," Sedgestar continued. "This concludes this meeting."

Sedgestar bounded down Clanrock, and immediately padded up to Grovepelt. The leader meowed something to him, and Grovepelt nodded, the two of them disappearing into Sedgestar's den at the roots of the Oak Tree to talk in private. Frostpaw turned to Autumnpaw.

"What do you think?" she meowed.

Autumnpaw shrugged, his gaze uncertain.

"It's what we argued for in the council, right? And, Sedgestar thinks it's the right thing to do. ThunderClan better be grateful though," Autumnpaw said, forcing a purr to break the heaviness that still hung in air after Sedgestar's announcement.

"But, what Shadowstar said..." Frostpaw murmured.

"So, we'll proceed with caution," Autumnpaw meowed, his voice firm.

He nudged Frostpaw with his muzzle, like he was trying to knock the worry out of her.

"Everything will be fine!" he insisted. "Shadowstar may be trying to tell us that we *should* go to battle. And, if not... well, we're ShadowClan. We can beat anything."

"Right," Frostpaw said, forcing her voice to be optimistic, if not for her own sake, for Autumnpaw's, since he was trying so hard to cheer her up.

Frostpaw's ears pricked as Swoopstrike came padding up to her.

"Forget about hunting," he rumbled. "Grab something *small* to eat, then meet me by the Burnt Sycamore for battle training."

"Yes, Swoopstrike," Frostpaw said, dipping her head.

Swoopstrike swept a critical gaze over her.

"I hope your battle training won't be as clumsy as your hunting this morning," he growled. "Or, else SkyClan will eat you alive."

Frostpaw felt the fur down her back bristle defensively.

"I would never let them," she said, a hint of a growl in her voice.

Swoopstrike's eyes flickered as he noticed her bristling fur, and a hint of amusement seemed to flash in his green gaze.

"Good," he grunted. "I would never live down such an embarrassment of an apprentice."

Feeling a plucky flash of courage, Frostpaw rose to her paws and fired back.

"No, I wouldn't be an embarrassment. Instead, I think cats would think you were a *horrible* mentor for sending me defenseless to the slaughter," she said.

Swoopstrike rumbled a brief purr.

"Well, then it's decided. You'll have to survive this for both of our sakes," Swoopstrike said with a flick of the tail as he turned and padded towards the thorn barrier.

He hesitated there to cast a final glance over his shoulder at Frostpaw, narrowing his eyes.

"But, don't keep me waiting at the Burnt Sycamore, or I'll kill and eat you myself," he growled.

"I'd give you indigestion in revenge," Frostpaw muttered at his back

as he padded away.

She turned to glance at Autumnpaw, who had been watching this whole exchange with a baffled expression.

"I don't understand you two's relationship," he sighed.

Sedgestar waited at the edge of the thunderpath, the pine branches sighing softly above him as they swayed in the evening breeze. The sky was a deep purple of twilight, and the thunderpath in front of him stretched out long into the darkness. It was quiet at this time of day.

Sedgestar was alone and at the edge of his territory. It was maybe a foolish idea to come without an escort; Grovepelt at least thought so. But, Sedgestar trusted Morningstar not to ambush him, especially not after coming to his camp and begging him for help. He didn't think the ThunderClan leader was capable of such deception.

The dense undergrowth on the other side of the border rustled, and a lone, grey-furred cat strode forward. Morningstar straightened his large form, and for a moment the two leaders only stared at each other, nothing but the smooth, black surface of the thunderpath between them.

Sedgestar couldn't help but imagining himself in Morningstar's position. A starving Clan depending on him, enemies gnawing at the edges of his territory, unable to drive them back. Morningstar still cut elegant silhouette despite the sharpness of his skeleton beneath his pelt, and the stress that must be weighing down on his shoulders. Sedgestar didn't envy the position. He even felt pity for him, but he knew much better than to let it show on his face. It was always better for his rivals not to decipher his emotions, even when they were pitiable rivals. Doing so would only give them leverage over him.

Morningstar waved his tail, signaling for Sedgestar to join him on the ThunderClan side of the thunderpath. Sedgestar crept towards the edge of the thunderpath, shooting a quick glance from side to side just in case any monsters had snuck up on him without him

noticing, but seeing the coast was still clear, he bounded forward.

Sedgestar strode up to Morningstar, nodding hello.

"Greetings Sedgestar," Morningstar said, bowing his head to the ShadowClan leader. "Have you come to a decision?"

"I have," Sedgestar said, sitting next to the ThunderClan leader. "But, there is something I must ask you first."

Morningstar blinked, his gaze hesitant.

"Go on," the grey tom said in a low voice.

"I feel for ThunderClan's plight," Sedgestar meowed, his expression smooth. "But, the question still remains: what is there in return for ShadowClan if we help you?"

A hint of anger seemed to creep across Morningstar's expression.

"We have a shared enemy. Isn't that reason enough to aid us?" Morningstar said, his ears flattening.

Sedgestar inclined his head towards the ThunderClan leader, his gaze even.

"Please, Morningstar, don't play dumb with me. You were not built for deceit. We both know that ThunderClan is in much more immediate peril than ShadowClan is," Sedgestar said cooly.

Morningstar's eyes glinted with anger, the fur down his back bristling slightly.

"I don't discount the fact that SkyClan may very well be a threat in the future to us," Sedgestar said, his tail swishing behind him. "But, that will not be until long after ThunderClan is gone. And, by that time, the allegiances of the forest may have shifted. There may be new allies for us then."

Morningstar narrowed his eyes, his jaw clenched.

"...Or, maybe not," Sedgestar mused, continuing. "And, then won't

we feel stupid for turning you aside."

"If you came here only to mock me, Sedgestar, you can leave my territory," Morningstar said, a barely repressed hiss in his voice.

Sedgestar averted his gaze momentarily from Morningstar's in a sort of apology.

"I do not mean to insult you," Sedgestar continued in a quieter voice. "I am just stating the facts. If I help you, I put the lives of my clan-mates on the line. There may be deaths. Deaths which may never have happened if I did nothing. You can't just ask me to sacrifice them blindly."

Morningstar's anger faded, but now he just looked trapped; his eyes wide and powerless like a cornered rabbit's.

"But, what can I give you? I can't give you land. I can't give you prey. We're starving. We need our land and prey, that's the whole reason I'm asking you for help!" Morningstar said.

Sedgestar nodded, unsurprised. He had expected Morningstar to protest along those lines.

"I know," he said, his expression unreadable. "So, you will have to owe ShadowClan a boon."

"...A boon?" Morningstar echoed.

"A favor," Sedgestar clarified. "Something equal in return. A battle for a battle. Although, understand, I do not wish to make a lasting alliance with ThunderClan. We will help you with your SkyClan problem, and then we will be done. Except for when it's time for you to repay your debt. Then your warriors must come to our aid, no questions asked."

Morningstar's ears twitched back. He was silent for several moments. Then, when he finally spoke, his voice was sardonic.

"...We have this old nursery tale in ThunderClan, about a ThunderClan warrior that makes a deal with a dark-hearted ShadowClan cat, owing him a blood-debt," Morningstar said. "When

the ShadowClan tom finally comes to collect, it doesn't end well for the ThunderClanner."

"I can imagine," Sedgestar said, letting a hint of dry amusement creep into his voice too. "But, it's a good thing then that this is real-life, and not a legend told to scare kits and apprentices into behaving, right?"

Sedgestar's gaze searched Morningstar's.

"Do you agree to our terms?" he asked.

Morningstar sighed softly.

"Do I have a choice?" he said, looking at Sedgestar with eyes that glimmered with a bit of bitterness.

Sedgestar opened his mouth to respond, but Morningstar shook his head to silence him.

"Don't waste your breath. Alright. I agree. On one condition," Morningstar said.

"Yes?" Sedgestar asked, twitching an ear towards him.

"ShadowClan must help us keep SkyClan out of our territory for three moons, starting from now."

"Three moons!" Sedgestar protested, his brow furrowing.

"That will be long enough for ThunderClan to recover our strength before leaf-bare, and then we will be able to hold them off alone," Morningstar said firmly, continuing. "Besides, it doesn't seem fair for you just to chase them out once, then expect them to stay there. Until we get our strength back, SkyClan will only respect our border if they think we have ShadowClan with us. You are mouse-brained if you think they won't test the waters."

Sedgestar was silent for a moment while he deliberated.

"Fine," he meowed finally. "Three moons. But, I will not engage my cats in more than three battles in that time span. I can't put them in

more danger than that."

"Fine," Morningstar grumbled.

"And, do I have your word as ThunderClan's leader that once those moons are over, your warriors will be there to help ShadowClan fight a battle?" Sedgestar asked. "No matter what it is, who we are fighting, whenever we may need it?"

Morningstar nodded.

"You do. I promise," he said in a deep, solemn voice.

Sedgestar nodded and rose to his paws, turning to leave.

"We can discuss the rest of details later," Sedgestar said from over his shoulder, as he approached the edge of the thunderpath.

"Four days," Morningstar said. "I want to attack in four days. The night of the new moon, just before dawn."

Sedgestar paused mid-stride.

"Very well then," he said, looking back over his shoulder. "That night, I will send a battle patrol to your camp. My cats will answer directly to their patrol leader, but they will follow your directions and tactics."

"You mean you don't want to share with us any of those night-battle strategies ShadowClan is so infamous for?" Morningstar said, a glint of humor in his eyes.

Sedgestar allowed a brief purr to rumble in his chest.

"You're going to have to try harder than that, ThunderClanner. We keep our secrets close to our chest from outsiders," he warned.

Sedgestar turned his back on Morningstar, crouching and preparing to cross the thunderpath.

"Sedgestar?"

Sedgestar flicked an ear to let him know that he heard him, his eyes still locked on the pines ahead.

"Thank you," Morningstar said, his voice rough with gratitude.

Sedgestar just flicked his ears again. He bounded back across the thunderpath and vanished into the trees of ShadowClan's territory.

A Hunch

It was nearly two moons since Sedgestar and Morningstar made their temporary alliance, and together ShadowClan and ThunderClan launched a surprise attack on two SkyClan patrols hunting in ThunderClan territory on the night of the new moon. Although Frostpaw hadn't been on that battle patrol, she had heard from Autumnpaw that the SkyClan cats had been sent flying back to their territory with their tails between their legs. The ease at which SkyClan had been sent retreating had reassured ShadowClan some, although the rotten pine omen from Shadowstar continued to loom ominously overhead like an ever-present vulture.

At the last Gathering, ShadowClan had gotten reports from ThunderClan that besides a few border skirmishes, which they had been able to handle alone, the SkyClan border remained quiet. The Gathering was still tense between the ThunderClan and SkyClan leaders, but no truce had been broken. And, even ShadowClan's border with WindClan was quiet; there wasn't even the typical jeering from passing patrols. Maybe the aggressive Rabbitstar also had finally been tempered. At the Gathering, Rabbitstar had announced that his five kits with his mate Thrushleap, had become apprentices—Harepaw, Honeypaw, Deerpaw, Lavenderpaw, and Ryepaw. Frostpaw figured that if anything could keep Rabbitstar too busy to stir up trouble, having five kits that were young apprentices would definitely suffice. ShadowClan's nursery had also gained a few new members— Dawntail had moved to the nursery and given birth to four kits.

Most of Frostpaw's days passed with a reassuringly regular pattern. Although, she thought it seemed like her and the other apprentices were being trained hard for battle—both in mock fights, and in team and strategy building exercises. But, they were also nearing the end of their training, so it was hard to say if the tough training was from a hidden fear of war, or just a normal increase in difficulty.

Still, as it seemed like the rest of the forest put their old feuds and quarrels behind them, Frostpaw tried to too. Even though the thought of Paledusk still nettled her like a burr in her pelt that she couldn't remove, everyday that passed, Frostpaw thought of him less and less. That was, until this morning, when Morningstar had sent word that SkyClan scent had been picked up on ThunderClan land for the first time since the battle.

Morningstar had requested a ShadowClan patrol to come investigate and aid in fighting if necessary.

Frostpaw's paws pounded on the sticky, black stone of the thunderpath. Once her paws crossed back onto grass, she came to a screeching stop near the tree-line, panting hard to catch her breath; her fur still prickling in anxiety. Swoopstrike was right next to her side, and she lingered close to him until the rest of the ShadowClan patrol made it safely across. Since Sedgestar was adamant about making sure the tunnel system remained a secret to ThunderClan, he didn't want ShadowClan using the tunnels at all when it came to traveling into ThunderClan territory. So, this had been Frostpaw's first time crossing the thunderpath above ground. It was nerve-wracking; she had spent what felt like ages watching the metallic flashes of monsters roar past, until there was finally a quiet gap. Swoopstrike then had swiftly ordered her to stick close to him, and they had both run for it.

Frostpaw glanced over at Pinepaw, who had also made the dash across the thunderpath with her, and she was relieved to see that the dark she-cat's fur also stood on end.

At least I wasn't the only one scared.

Frostpaw saw Redclaw pad over to Pinepaw, trying to flatten her daughter's still bristling fur with a lick, but Pinepaw shrugged her off, stepping away from Redclaw and drawing herself up to her full height, forcing her pelt to lie flat.

As the moments stretched on and on, the ShadowClan patrol waited, and Frostpaw felt her racing heart slowing. The ShadowClan patrol stood in silence at the edge of the trees, gazing into the unfamiliar territory in front of them.

Swoopstrike shot an irritated glance upwards at the sun-high sky.

"Stupid ThunderClan," he grumbled, seemingly half to himself. "We're doing so much for them already, and they make us meet them at sun-high of all times! So inconsiderate. And, they aren't even here yet... I'm missing my nap for these mangy mice-munchers."

Frostpaw nodded along, doing her best to keep her expression serious and to swallow back the purr threatening to rumble in her throat. She did find it pretty amusing that Swoopstrike was whining like a kitten about missing his nap, but judging by the lashing of Swoopstrike's tail, her mentor was in no mood to be laughed at.

Frostpaw's ears pricked as fresh ThunderClan scent drifted into her nose.

"Greetings."

Acornear emerged from the nearby undergrowth, giving the ShadowClan patrol a nod as he padded up to them. Behind the ThunderClan deputy, five more ThunderClan cats appeared; four warriors and an apprentice, all of them blinking at the ShadowClan patrol with friendly curiosity as the ThunderClan cats encircled the ShadowClan ones.

Frostpaw eyed them guardedly, shrinking nearer to Swoopstrike. She wasn't used to such friendly behavior from ThunderClan. It didn't feel right; they were never this friendly with ShadowClan, not even at Gatherings. But, judging from their expressions, the ThunderClanners seemed genuinely grateful for ShadowClan's help, and as Frostpaw scanned her gaze over their pelts, she realized that they looked better than when she last saw them too. Their fur was sleek, and their ribs no longer poked out from under their pelts.

They are finally catching enough prey for themselves now that SkyClan doesn't control a big chunk of their territory.

"This is Fernclaw and Foxbite," Acornear said, introducing the tortoiseshell and ginger she-cats behind him respectively. "And, Fernclaw's apprentice, Screechpaw."

The dark brown tabby apprentice nodded hello to the ShadowClan patrol.

"Nettlepelt and Beechfur," Acornear finished, flicking his tail towards a dark grey, spiky-furred she-cat, and a brown tabby tom.

"Was the situation properly explained?" Acornear asked. "This morning we caught wind of SkyClan scent deep in our territory. We scoured the area, but we could find no trace of them. If they are still in the territory, we want you help tracking them down and —"

"We know," Swoopstrike said, interrupting him with an impatient growl. "We heard this whole spiel from Pineclaw already when Morningstar sent him to our camp. I'll be leading the ShadowClan patrol, and these cats and I—"

Swoopstrike flicked his tail to indicate the rest of the ShadowClan patrol: Emberflower, Redclaw, Dappledpelt, Leafbreeze, Pinepaw and Frostpaw.

"—are the best trackers in the forest."

Frostpaw raised her chin, feeling a flash of pride from Swoopstrike's compliment of the patrol. Although it was quickly followed by a shadow of doubt. Maybe she wasn't that great of a tracker after all, and was just allowed to tag along because she was Swoopstrike's apprentice...

"So, although ThunderClan failed to find SkyClan, I'm sure we won't," Swoopstrike concluded with a smug twitch of his whiskers, pulling Frostpaw back out of her thoughts.

Acornear was silent for a moment, and Frostpaw studied his face closely. The hot-headed ThunderClan deputy's lip twitched, threatening a snarl. He seemed to be fighting hard to keep his emotions under control. Frostpaw had seen Acornear's previous clashes with Swoopstrike before, and she knew it must be killing the proud tom to have to put up with Swoopstrike's arrogance.

"I see," Acornear responded finally in a measured voice, managing to keep his face smooth. "Well, ThunderClan is grateful that

Sedgestar sent his best cats for the job."

Swoopstrike's tail twitched irritably like he was bothered he hadn't manage to get a visible rise from the ThunderClan deputy.

"Well Sedgestar didn't send us over here to waste our time," Swoopstrike grunted. "Are we just going to stand at the border exchanging pleasantries all day, or do we have a real patrol to go on? Every heartbeat we waste here is one that my clan-mates and I could be spending hunting for our Clan and patrolling our own territory."

Or, napping in the sun.

Frostpaw's whiskers twitched in amusement.

"Of course," Acornear said, narrowing his eyes. "Let's head out. We will show you where we scented SkyClan."

The ThunderClan patrol turned, disappearing quickly into the undergrowth, with the ShadowClan patrol following closely behind.

Acornear was leading the group through the thick tangle of undergrowth, weaving through the maze-like vegetation with ease. Frostpaw padded at Swoopstrike's shoulder as he gazed at Acornear's back with an intense gaze from narrowed green eyes. Frostpaw watched Swoopstrike, feeling a prickle of concern.

"We are supposed to be helping them... maybe you shouldn't try to ruffle his fur so much," Frostpaw muttered in a low voice, not loud enough to reach any ThunderClan warriors' ears.

Swoopstrike's ears pricked, and he tore his gaze off Acornear to stare at Frostpaw in shock.

"I'd appreciate it if my apprentice listened to my advice for once, rather than trying to give me some," he hissed back in a whisper.

Frostpaw's pelt prickled indignantly.

I always listen to your advice!

"Frostpaw's right."

Another voice broke in as Dappledpelt slipped up on Swoopstrike's other side.

"There's no need to antagonize him deliberately," Dappledpelt whispered. "It's counter-productive to our objective. Sedgestar ordered us to help them."

"Sedgestar didn't order us to be nice to them," Swoopstrike shot back.

Dappledpelt rolled her eyes.

"If a SkyClan cat pins you down, do you think Acornear's leaping to your aid if you keep this up?" she hissed.

"I don't need Acornear," Swoopstrike growled stubbornly. "I have you all."

"Frostpaw and I appreciate your devotion," Dappledpelt responded drily, her whiskers twitching in faint amusement. "But, more claws on our side are better than less, right?"

Swoopstrike gave an irritated huff.

"Whatever," he muttered, pulling ahead to stalk only a paw-step behind Acornear, like he wished he could lead the patrol, if only he knew where they were going.

Frostpaw watched him with a furrowed brow.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure he doesn't claw up our allies," Dappledpelt said in a somewhat amused voice, flicking Frostpaw's side with her tail reassuringly.

Dappledpelt padded ahead to walk close to Swoopstrike.

Frostpaw found herself falling back some, and soon she and Pinepaw were silently walking in matched step. Frostpaw tilted her head back to gaze up at the canopy of unfamiliar trees. The huge, leafy branches above her didn't hold the familiar comfort that the

thickly bristled pine needles of ShadowClan territory did. This canopy was so thick, it almost blotted out the sky completely. Above her, there was only a sea of light greens and a few yellows, heralding the quickly approaching leaf-fall. It was strange to look up in the middle of the day, and not catch glimpses of the blue sky between the branches.

Frostpaw was brought back down to earth when a bramble bush snagged a clump of fur from her pelt. She let out a hiss of annoyance.

"Tell me about it," Pinepaw grumbled. "Already, I've gotten five pieces of fur pulled out from all this dumb prickly undergrowth. Truly, it's a miracle that all of ThunderClan isn't bald!"

A loud purr burst from Frostpaw's throat, but she tried to quickly swallow it back.

"Pinepaw!" she gasped. "Shh! You'll offend them!"

"What? It's true isn't it?" Pinepaw said, her whiskers twitching as her amber gaze gleamed in amusement.

Frostpaw was still trying to stifle her purrs when Screechpaw dropped back to walk with the other two apprentices. He seemed younger than Frostpaw and Pinepaw. Frostpaw assumed he must have just been made an apprentice, judging by how his form was still very lanky; not yet filled out with lean muscles from moons of training.

"Hi, I'm Screechpaw. What are your names?" the brown tabby asked, giving them a friendly blink.

"We already know you're Screechpaw, frog-brain. Acornear introduced you," Pinepaw said with an eye-roll.

There was a flash of confusion on Screechpaw's face for a moment before the ThunderClan apprentice seemed to deflate some, turning aside.

"Frostpaw," Frostpaw said to introduce herself. "And, the mean one here is Pinepaw."

Pinepaw gave an offended huff, but said nothing. Screechpaw quickly perked back up.

"Hi Frostpaw! It's nice to meet you. I haven't been to a Gathering yet, so this is my first time meeting cats from another clan. What's life in ShadowClan like?" Screechpaw asked earnestly.

Frostpaw mused for a moment.

"Uh, well, I guess I don't know what living in ThunderClan is like exactly, so I'm not sure how ShadowClan is different," Frostpaw said.

She flicked her tail upwards, indicating the covered up sky.

"Although, one thing is, we normally prefer not to patrol at sun-high," Frostpaw said. "We like morning, evening, and night patrols much better."

"But, sun-high patrols are my favorite! I hate waking up for dawn patrol," Screechpaw said, wrinkling his face up.

"It's too bright and hot at sun-high," Frostpaw said with a shrug.

"That's strange," Screechpaw said thoughtfully. "What else is different?"

"Our territory is different than yours too. Much less annoying thorns," Pinepaw growled irritably as she tugged her tail free from another bramble bush.

"Oh! I've noticed that from across the thunderpath!" Screechpaw said. "There's no undergrowth under the pines. But, ShadowClan is supposed to be so good at stalking. How do you guys sneak up on anything without the cover?"

"That's a confidential ShadowClan secret," Pinepaw sniffed, raising her chin.

"If we told you, we'd have to kill you," Frostpaw said with a faint purr in her voice.

"Wow! You're just like the stories!" Screechpaw said delightedly.

He turned to Frostpaw.

"Also, I've never seen a cat with your fur pattern before. Is that a ShadowClan-thing?" he said curiously.

"Er... no. Just, a me-thing," Frostpaw said, feeling her pelt slight warm in embarrassment as she was reminded of her odd appearance.

Luckily she didn't have to think about it long once Pinepaw spoke.

"Yeah, the stories are all true," Pinepaw said in a grave voice. "We can turn into darkness itself when we enter shadows. We also eat kittens and disobedient apprentices that wander off or get lost at night."

"You're not nearly big enough to eat me," Screechpaw said simply.

Pinepaw narrowed her eyes.

"Is that a challenge?" she asked, her expression turning deadly serious.

Screechpaw's eyes widened a bit in fear.

"The scent was detected not that much farther ahead," Acornear meowed loudly over his shoulder to the entire group following him, interrupting their conversation.

"Yowl it a bit louder next time. I don't think the SkyClan cats... You know, *the ones we're searching for,* heard you," Swoopstrike's sarcastic voice hissed, his tail-tip twitching.

Acornear's form stiffened, but he said nothing.

Acornear led the group to a massive sycamore tree. Frostpaw felt strangely relieved to spot the familiar type of tree after wandering in foreign territory for so long. It was an impressive specimen, its branches towering above its neighboring trees. Frostpaw tilted her head back to gaze up at it, wondering if this was what the Burnt

Sycamore looked like during its life.

"The Great Sycamore," Screechpaw told Frostpaw proudly, noticing her admiring look. "This area around it is one of the best hunting grounds in our territory."

Frostpaw nodded. A comment about the Burnt Sycamore training grounds in ShadowClan territory lingered on her tongue, but she bit it back. She knew that she shouldn't share any information more than necessary with ThunderClan. Screechpaw might seem harmless now, but who knew what he'd be like when he was a warrior.

Acornear flicked his tail to indicate the roots of the tree. The ShadowClan patrol clustered around, everyone getting a good sniff. Frostpaw opened her jaws, the unmistakable SkyClan scent of windblown trees settling on her tongue. SkyClan cats were definitely here. The scent was strong, and certainly less than a day old too.

"Are we close to the SkyClan border?" Emberflower asked Acornear, turning to the ThunderClan deputy and pricking her ears curiously.

Acornear shook his head.

"Hardly," he said with a growl. "Closer to their border than to yours, sure. But, they would have still have to trek a bit to get here. It's not just fox-lengths away."

"The scent is so strong," Redclaw muttered. "They scent-marked here deliberately."

"They want to send a message," Dappledpelt agreed, nodding. "They are claiming your land as theirs."

Nettlepelt gave a low growl, the ThunderClan warrior's thick fur bristling out.

"Well, we will send a message back to them, with our claws," she growled.

"If you can find them," Redclaw pointed out curtly. "They might just be doing this to antagonize or mock you. They could have slipped

here in the night, then left. They might not even be on your territory at all."

"That's the thing, before we came across this sent, the dawn patrol had already checked the SkyClan border. There are no scent trails," Acornear said. "No entry or exit scents from them there."

Frostpaw's ears flattened in confusion. Swoopstrike's brow furrowed.

"So you can't find where they crossed the border, at all?" Swoopstrike asked, narrowing his eyes.

"They could've disguised their scents or entered from another place," Acornear said, his voice hot with defensiveness. "But, no. Judging solely on scent, it seems like they magically appeared here at the Great Sycamore, then vanished."

"Why bother being so careful disguising their scents if they only wanted to send a message?" Frostpaw muttered to Pinepaw.

"It doesn't add up," she growled in agreement.

"Is this the only place they scent-marked?" Swoopstrike asked.

"I'm not sure," Acornear admitted. "Right now, I have another patrol nearby, combing the forest to check."

Swoopstrike waved his tail.

"ShadowClan, split up and search for scents trails," he said. "If ThunderClan missed something, we will be sure to find it."

The ShadowClan cats slowly dispersed, noses to the ground, tail-tip twitching faintly in concentration. Frostpaw glided in a circle around the SkyClan scent markers, hoping to pick up a trail leading from the scent there outward, but she could pick up no cat scents besides her clan-mates and ThunderClan. Remembering her training, Frostpaw breathed deeply, thoughtfully running the air over her tongue, this time, not searching for cat scents, but any scent that seemed out of place that the SkyClan cats might have used to disguise their scents.

Frostpaw's concentration was interrupted when Redclaw let out a mew.

"I found something!" she said.

Frostpaw and the rest of the ShadowClan and ThunderClan cats quickly gathered around Redclaw. She was standing next to a bramble bush growing at the base of a tree. There, she pointed with her nose to a piece of white fur stuck in the brambles.

"SkyClan scent," Redclaw declared.

Acornear leaned in to get a sniff.

"That's still not useful," he said with a faint growl. "We already know that they were here. We want to know where they went. And, one tuff of fur doesn't tell us anything about that."

"Well, now we know to check the brambles and thorns more closely for traces of them," Swoopstrike snapped, quickly leaping to Redclaw's defense. "Your cats didn't find any pieces of fur. Did they Acornear?"

Acornear growled, and Frostpaw saw his claws unsheathe and sink into the ground, but the deputy turned away before the argument could escalate. Frostpaw padded closer to the bramble bush, studying the chunk of fur for a moment before her head turned, her gaze wandering to the nearby tree trunk. Frostpaw narrowed her eyes. Very faint white lines marked the dark brown trunk of the tree in front of her muzzle. Sap still oozed at the corners of the lines, not yet solidified, indicating the marks were fresh. Swoopstrike padded to Frostpaw's side, and his gaze followed hers.

"Claw marks?" he mused with a faint growl.

"The trees..." Frostpaw murmured, an icy rush of fear surging through her as her heart dropped down to her stomach.

Her eyes had already flown upwards, and she was studying the branches above their heads warily, her muscles tense. Swoopstrike's ears pricked, understanding her instantly.

"Of course," he growled, urgency filling his voice.

Swoopstrike whirled back to Acornear, wasting no time.

"You're under attack," he growled at the brown tom's back, his silver and black tail lashing.

Acornear turned back to him, his eyes wide.

"What do you mean?" Acornear asked.

"It's an ambush, frog-brain!" Swoopstrike hissed. "And, you walked us right into a trap! They're traveling in the trees. They scent-marked to lure you here, and meanwhile, they are up there! Waiting for the right moment to rain down on us!"

All the cats' eyes went wide, and their gazes shot upwards to stare into the branches above them. But, there seemed to be no SkyClan warriors hidden among the trees.

"I don't see any," Screechpaw said in a hushed, fearful voice.

"They must be nearby," Swoopstrike growled, his brow furrowed in confusion. "They wanted you to be here... why else would they scent-mark?"

Acornear's eyes went round with fear.

"The other patrol... I sent them here before us to search for scents! Fox-dung, SkyClan must be after them. They'll be outnumbered!" Acornear meowed.

"We have to find them!" Foxbite gasped, digging her claws into the ground.

"Follow their scent-trail!" Acornear commanded, springing forward.

But, Swoopstrike leapt in front of him.

"Stop!" he snarled. "Just, think for a moment! We can't just go charging after them with no plan, or we'll be just as trapped as they are. At the mercy of SkyClan pouncing down at us from above!"

Acornear tensed up, snarling at Swoopstrike.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Way," Acornear rumbled, each word forced out through clenched fangs.

Swoopstrike's eyes flashed in heated frustration.

"Look frog-brain," Swoopstrike snarled, lashing his tail. "I know you're dull, so I'll put it simply: We're lucky that SkyClan isn't attacking us right now. We've been given precious time to plan here. Don't toss it away like crowfood!"

Acornear didn't respond, instead sinking unsheathed claws into the ground. But, Swoopstrike didn't move. He set his jaw and gazed at the ThunderClan deputy stubbornly. Heavy tension fell over the group like a fog. Frostpaw's muscles tightened. If Acornear attacked Swoopstrike, what would they do? Frostpaw had to fight on her mentor's side. But, Sedgestar had made an alliance with ThunderClan!

A faint, pained yowl echoed through the trees, cutting through the tension surrounding the group like a claw.

"We're already too late," Acornear snarled, his ears flattening. "The trap has been sprung. And, I won't leave my clan-mates to fight alone."

Acornear gave Swoopstrike a final bitter look.

"Join us if you wish, snake-heart," he spat.

With that, Acornear dodged around Swoopstrike, and the ThunderClan patrol was gone, dashing towards the sounds of faint fighting. The ShadowClan patrol remained with Swoopstrike, who was glaring after the ThunderClan patrol, his tail lashing.

"We need to help them," Emberflower cut in, padding up to Swoopstrike. "Sedgestar gave Morningstar his word."

"Of course we're going to help ThunderClan!" Swoopstrike snapped. "We just aren't going to be as frog-brained as them about it."

Emberflower narrowed her eyes at Swoopstrike, a silent warning in her gaze, and Swoopstrike quickly looked away from Sedgestar's formidable mate, his head bowed in apology.

"Sorry, Emberflower. I just—I just need a moment to think," Swoopstrike growled.

Dappledpelt walked up to Swoopstrike, lying her tail over his back reassuringly as he stood stiff, his brow furrowed and his head still bowed as he thought.

"Why is SkyClan trying so hard to deliberately lure a patrol out here?" Swoopstrike muttered. "Why did they scent-mark, when they could've not and just ambushed a regular patrol passing by?"

Frostpaw flattened her ears, her tail twitching thoughtfully behind her.

"Morningstar would send a lot of cats out to investigate the scent marks," Frostpaw murmured. "More cats than a regular patrol."

Pinepaw tilted her head.

"But, wouldn't that make it harder for SkyClan? Because it's more cats to ambush?" Pinepaw meowed in confusion.

"No. Because this isn't their real target," Swoopstrike said, raising his head, his eyes widening in realization. "This ambush is a diversion. SkyClan must have sent multiple attack patrols..."

"ThunderClan's camp!" Dappledpelt gasped, finishing Swoopstrike's train of thought, and digging her claws into the ground.

The eyes of everyone on the patrol widened as the true gravity of the situation set in.

"It will be defenseless with all their warriors out, searching for SkyClan!" Emberflower said.

"We need to get there," Swoopstrike growled.

"But, how?" Leafbreeze cut in. "Do you know where their camp is?

None of us are familiar with the territory!"

The ShadowClan patrol gazed at each other with wide, helpless eyes.

"We need to get Acornear," Redclaw pointed out, her tail lashing.

"Yes. That *frog-brain!"* Swoopstrike said with a growl of agreement.

Then they were flying through the trees, hot on the trail of the ThunderClan patrol, and the sounds of battle growing louder in their ears. Frostpaw ran next to Pinepaw, her jaw set. Tight anxiety clenched her chest as her thoughts turned to the battle and bloodshed that awaited them. Redclaw dropped back to run on Pinepaw's other side.

"There's no telling how many SkyClan warriors there will be at ThunderClan's camp," Redclaw said, her voice tight. *"Please.* Be careful. Look out for each other."

"Don't worry, Mom. We've been trained well," Pinepaw said, her voice firm and her amber eyes fixed unwaveringly ahead.

"We will, Redclaw," Frostpaw promised.

Frostpaw crashed through the undergrowth, and the battle suddenly appeared in front of her. It was hard to tell how many SkyClan and how many ThunderClan warriors there were here. Writhing cats clawed each other in the narrow gaps between thorn patches; flashing in and out of sight as their fighting took them behind and then back in front of bushes and ferns.

"You all hang back! I'll find Acornear," Swoopstrike snapped to the ShadowClan patrol before diving into the battleground.

Frostpaw gazed anxiously after Swoopstrike, but like the other fighting cats, she quickly lost sight of him as he disappeared into some bushes. Frostpaw shifted from paw to paw impatiently. It seemed like Swoopstrike was gone for a long time, but in reality she knew it couldn't have been more than a few moments. But, then he had reappeared, Screechpaw in tow. Swoopstrike only had a few new scratches on his pelt, but Screechpaw looked much worse for

wear. He had swelling around one eye and was missing huge clumps of fur from his shoulders.

"Where's Acornear?" Emberflower asked.

"I found him, but he didn't want to leave the battle on a hunch," Swoopstrike growled. "He told me to take Screechpaw."

"I'll show you the way to camp," Screechpaw said, raising his chin bravely.

"There's no time to waste," Emberflower urged.

Screechpaw nodded.

"This way!" he meowed, taking off into the trees.

The ShadowClan patrol followed, paws pounding on the hard-packed earth.

As the cats flashed through the trees, the sound of the patrols fighting faded behind them into nothingness, and soon they were running through a silent forest. The only sound in Frostpaw's ears was the rattling of her own rapid breaths and the roaring of her blood. Frostpaw's gaze quickly scanned the unfamiliar forest ahead of her, searching for any hint that they were close to the camp, or close to a SkyClan patrol.

The hint came in the form of an earsplitting wail of horror and grief that raised the fur on Frostpaw's shoulders.

"They've already attacked," Swoopstrike snarled, eyes narrowed.

"We're almost to the camp!" Screechpaw panted, the young cat doubling down and managing to put on a final burst of speed.

Suddenly, the undergrowth around them cleared. The ground beneath Frostpaw's feet began to slope gently downward, the dirt becoming sandy. The overwhelming scent of ThunderClan was heavy in her nose, but she could also smell sharp SkyClan scent penetrating the ThunderClan fog. Yowling and snarling echoed in her ears from ahead, and the air was rank with the metallic tang of

blood and sour scent of fear. Frostpaw's stomach clenched in fright.

The ShadowClan patrol was quickly approaching a long line of gorse bushes. Frostpaw's eyes scanned the imposing wall, searching for a way through the thorny plants. Her heart pounded hard beneath her ribs. She was beginning to fear that they were going to crash straight through the gorse, when she noticed that Screechpaw was leading them towards a small tunnel, nearly hidden in the shadows of the gorse.

The patrol streamed single-file through the tunnel. Frostpaw winced as the thorns pulled out more of her fur. But, before she could even worry about her stinging pelt, she was out of the tunnel, and catapulted right into the middle of a vicious battle. Frostpaw came to a halting stop, blinking hard as she tried to gather her bearings.

She was standing in a sandy ravine, encircled by gorse bushes and brambles. And, the camp in front of her was in utter chaos. There were ThunderClan cats in front of bushes, presumedly dens, fighting with all their might to keep a wave of SkyClan warriors from breaking through. There were cats snarling and rolling in the middle of the clearing. There were cats pressed hard against the camp wall, having to fight the cats in front of them and the thorns behind them. And, there were even cats coated in blood, lying much too still on the sandy ground.

Frostpaw was snapped out of her thoughts when a yowl rang out through the camp.

"Reinforcements!" a grey SkyClan she-cat with bright amber eyes shouted the warning.

A long-furred white tom's head reared up from where he was crouched over a pinned ThunderClan warrior in the middle of camp. Blood dripped from his lips as the tom swept furious green eyes over the newly arrived cats.

Frostpaw's stomach clenched.

Paledusk.

"ShadowClan!" Paledusk spat venomously. "This is not your fight!"

"Then make us leave, mouse-heart!" Swoopstrike yowled. *"ShadowClan, attack!"*

Swoopstrike hared forward and sprung at Paledusk, tackling the larger tom and sending the two of them tumbling away.

While it was clear that SkyClan had badly outnumbered ThunderClan before ShadowClan's arrival, the sides now seemed much more evenly matched. The ShadowClan patrol surged forward like a wave, falling on the SkyClan cats, and Frostpaw joined in the charge.

She wasn't familiar enough with the appearances of all of the ThunderClan or SkyClan cats to tell them apart, especially not when they were covered in blood and dirt. So, she had to rely on scent and context alone to know who her enemies were. An elderly brown tabby she-cat was crouched near a tunnel of ferns, bleeding from a multitude of scratches as she snarled at two ginger toms who loomed over her.

That looks like a ThunderClan cat in trouble.

Frostpaw ran towards the brown tabby she-cat. Frostpaw leapt and pounced onto the back of the dark ginger tom from behind, biting his ear and kicking her hind-legs down his back. The tom yowled in shock, wiggling hard to try to dislodge her. The other ginger tom with a bend in his tail turned towards Frostpaw, but before he could help his friend, the brown she-cat shot at him with surprising speed for her age and clawed at his face, hissing furiously. Frostpaw was jolted back to attention when the tom under her suddenly fell to his side, rolling to crush her under him.

Snake-dung!

Frostpaw scrambled, hissing and spitting as she tried to claw her way out from under the ginger tom. She was half-way back on her feet when a paw flashed out and snagged her long fur. The ginger tom growled furiously, keeping her in place with his one paw and using his other to pin her down, muscling her to the ground as

Frostpaw bucked and wiggled, flailing her paws. She managed to twist her neck enough to sink her fangs into one of his fore-legs, and he yowled, releasing her. But, before she could scramble out of range, his claws flashed towards her, scoring down her shoulder. Frostpaw hissed as she felt hot blood well in the fresh wounds.

Suddenly, a tabby apprentice was on the ginger tom's back, clinging to his fur, snarling and screaming like a trapped weasel.

Screechpaw!

Frostpaw took advantage of the distracted SkyClan tom, springing forward and swiping at his muzzle, making contact and snapping his head to the side. The tom growled in fury and pain as Screechpaw leapt off of him, and to Frostpaw's side. The tom looked up, and noticing that his companion was gone, driven off by the brown ThunderClan she-cat, he gave a final growl before turning tail and fleeing from Frostpaw and the two ThunderClan cats.

Panting, Frostpaw turned to Screechpaw. The swollen area around his eye had blown up even more, completely blocking his eye from sight. He was panting hard, and blood dripped down from a wound on his chest.

The older brown tabby she-cat limped over to them, her eyes wide with concern as she looked at Screechpaw.

"Screechpaw! You need to get into the medicine cat's den right away. Fallowtuft is in there with the other injured cats," the she-cat said.

"No. I can still fight," Screechpaw panted, his one good eye narrowing in determination.

"You're barely standing on your paws!" the she-cat protested.

Screechpaw ignored her, instead turning and gazing at her in confusion.

"Why aren't you in the elder's den, Pearnose? Where's Mothwhisker?" Screechpaw asked.

The name clicked in Frostpaw's mind. She remembered that Pearnose was ThunderClan's older medicine cat, but at the previous Gathering Morningstar had announced that she retired to the elders' den due to painful arthritis. She had gotten a lot of cheering and sympathy by all cats present— medicine cats were generally liked by even cats from other clans.

Pearnose shook her head, her eyes welling with grief.

"Mothwhisker is dead," Pearnose said, her voice rough. "I asked him to come with me to defend Fallowtuft and the medicine cat's den, but he went down fighting instead. Of course. The old fool."

Screechpaw gasped, sitting down on his haunches hard, his eyes round with shock and pain.

Frostpaw felt a stab of empathy in her chest.

I wonder if this is the first time someone he knew has died...

Pearnose padded over to Screechpaw to nose his side gently, raising him back to his paws and ushering him towards the medicine cat's den. Pearnose glanced at Frostpaw.

"I will take care of him from here," Pearnose said. "Thank you for your help, ShadowClan warrior."

"Apprentice," Frostpaw corrected automatically, touching her paw to her chest. "Frostpaw."

"Ah, yes I remember you from a gathering sometime back," Pearnose said, blinking curiously at Frostpaw. "When Sedgestar announced your inclusion into ShadowClan. Will you wait here for a moment to guard the entrance while I bring Screechpaw inside?"

"Yeah," Frostpaw said, nodding.

She padded over to block the fern tunnel with her body as Pearnose and Sreechpaw vanished inside, and Frostpaw turned to scan the sea of fighting cats in front of her. The battle had seemed to reach a stalemate. ThunderClan was fighting fang-and-claw to defend their camp with ShadowClan's help, but SkyClan was still holding strong,

refusing to be driven from the ravine. Frostpaw spotted Morningstar's thick grey pelt, bushed out and prickling around him as he battled in the very densest area of fighting, bleeding from a multitude of cuts and bites on all parts of him, but his eyes still blazed with energy and fury.

As she continued to scan the crowd she felt a jolt of relief as her gaze found both Redclaw and Swoopstrike. Redclaw and Emberflower were moving in joint, fluid motion as they battled a SkyClan cat together. The litter-mates' motions were so in sync it was hard to tell where the tortoiseshell she-cat stopped and the ginger she-cat began. Meanwhile, Swoopstrike and Dappledpelt were back to back, lashing out at a ring of SkyClan cats that surrounded them; the strength and anger radiating out from the pair was a fearsome sight.

Frostpaw's gaze flicked to the edges of the camp, and she saw Pinepaw there. Frostpaw tensed, her stomach flipping. Pinepaw had gotten cornered with her back to the prickly gorse bushes, and a SkyClan cat in front of her. Pinepaw was hissing and holding her own against the grey SkyClan she-cat for the moment at least, but she was still trapped with no where to flee if need be.

The ferns behind Frostpaw rustled as Pearnose came limping back out.

"I have to go help my friend," Frostpaw said urgently, glancing back at Pearnose.

Pearnose had barely begun to nod an okay before Frostpaw took off, sticking to the edges of the camp, where the fighting was the most sparse to get to Pinepaw as quickly as possible.

Frostpaw was approaching Pinepaw and the grey SkyClan cat quickly, and she tensed her muscles in anticipation of leaping onto the SkyClan cat, when suddenly something heavy hit her back from above. *Hard.*

Letting out a cry of shock and pain, Frostpaw's spine arched as her back buckled, her knees collapsed under her and chin smacked the ground. Frostpaw felt two paws on her back and sides, trying to pin

her in place to the ground. Shaking off her surprise and blocking out the pain of the fresh bruises, Frostpaw kicked out her hind-paws at the rear feet of her attacker, knocking them off balance. Frostpaw quickly reared up, shoving her feet back under her as she dislodged her attacker's fore-paws, whirling to face them.

"Larchpaw?" Frostpaw snarled, half-incredulous and half-furious at the sight of the familiar SkyClan apprentice from Gatherings.

"Larchtail now," was all the tabby hissed at her before Larchtail's eyes narrowed into angry slits, and she leapt at Frostpaw again.

Immediately, Frostpaw found herself snapping right back into battle-mode. Frostpaw ducked, and Larchtail sailed harmlessly over her head. Frostpaw turned and reared up on her hind-legs, snarling as she brought her paws slamming down towards Larchtail's head. She managed to smack the side of the she-cat's head, which was enough to get Larchtail to spring backwards, away from her, but not enough to stun her with a direct hit.

Out of the corner of her vision, Frostpaw saw more cats dropping down into the ravine from the branches of the trees that encircled the outside of the ThunderClan camp, like Larchtail must've done—a wave of fresh SkyClan warriors.

Icy fear crystalized in Frostpaw's veins. The number of warriors in the battle were back in SkyClan's favor. Larchtail flashed towards Frostpaw, but she dodged, trying to dash around her. Frostpaw's focus was still on trying to get to Pinepaw. Even with Larchtail and Pinepaw's SkyClan opponent against them, Frostpaw knew that she and Pinepaw would be able to fight better together, watching each other's backs, than they would separately.

Frostpaw managed to flash around Larchtail, haring away while the SkyClan cat gave chase. Frostpaw tensed up as she imagined Larchtail's claws close behind her.

Please don't leap on me. Please don't leap on me.

But, she had almost reached Pinepaw and the grey SkyClan she-cat. Frostpaw saw Pinepaw's eyes widen in surprise as she took in the

scene of Frostpaw fast approaching her opponent from behind, and Larchtail chasing Frostpaw.

"Suneyes, look out!" Larchtail yowled the warning to her clan-mate.

The grey she-cat started to turn towards Larchtail's cry, but it was too late, Frostpaw had already leapt. Frostpaw bowled over Suneyes, scratching and biting at her short grey pelt, and the two she-cats went tumbling towards the wall of gorse. As soon as Frostpaw hit Suneyes, Pinepaw wasted no time at all in leaping over them, straight towards Larchtail. Larchtail tried to turn her run into a scrambling stop, but she basically collided with Pinepaw, who wrapped her paws around Larchtail's shoulders and sunk her fangs deeply into Larchtail's ear, eliciting a screech of pain.

Her claws still digging into Suneyes' pelt, Frostpaw threw her weight to the side, managing to turn their tumble into a something that resembled a more controlled roll. When Frostpaw rolled underneath Suneyes, she mustered up all the strength she could manage in her hind legs, released her fore-claws, and gave Suneyes a kick strong enough to throw the SkyClan warrior a few tail-lengths away, and straight into the thorny gorse bushes. Frostpaw rolled back to her paws as she watched the grey she-cat growl and claw her way back out of the thorns.

Frostpaw felt the fur on her side stir as Pinepaw appeared next to her. Pinepaw positioned herself so she and Frostpaw stood with their flanks side to side, but they were facing opposite directions. As Frostpaw kept an eye on Suneyes, Pinepaw watched as Larchtail paced a few tail-lengths away from the ShadowClan apprentices, growling menacingly as blood dripped down her face from her newly torn ear.

"Nice for you to show up, Frostpaw," Pinepaw said from over Frostpaw's shoulder, her voice a sarcastic growl.

Frostpaw's ears pricked in surprise at her tone, but she didn't dare take her gaze off Suneyes to look at her den-mate.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Frostpaw huffed in low tones, not wanting the SkyClan cats to hear them squabbling. "I came here to

help you!"

Frostpaw twitched her ears towards Suneyes to indicate the SkyClan warrior, who had finally managed to drag herself out of the thorny gorse.

"All you did was bring more enemies," Pinepaw hissed, narrowing her ears at Larchtail.

"What am I, a piece of crowfood? I brought one enemy, *and* myself! At worst, it evens out," Frostpaw growled.

"Duck," Pinepaw hissed.

Frostpaw hit the ground without hesitation. She and Pinepaw might be arguing, but Frostpaw had learned well from her training that when a clan-mate told you to duck, you did it. No questions asked.

Larchtail went sailing harmlessly over both Pinepaw's and Frostpaw's heads, and then Frostpaw surged forward. When Larchtail landed, but before she had time to turn around, Frostpaw landed a swipe on her flank, her claws tearing through the SkyClan cat's flesh. Larchtail hissed, but Frostpaw was already retreating backwards, back to the relative safety of Pinepaw. Suneyes stalked over to Larchtail, while Pinepaw turned to stand at Frostpaw's shoulder to square up against them, and for a heartbeat, the two sets of she-cats just stared at each other.

Frostpaw risked a glance behind her. The tide was turning in SkyClan's favor. There were several SkyClan warriors fighting against ThunderClan or ShadowClan cats two to one. They were driving the ThunderClan cats back into their dens, where they fought frantically to keep the SkyClan cats away from their young, wounded and sick. Frostpaw spotted Redclaw wedged underneath a bramble bush, which appeared to be the nursery. She was blocking the entrance with her body and swiping at any SkyClan cat that came too close.

The pair of SkyClan warriors in front of Frostpaw began to advance, growling softly. Frostpaw tensed, snarling at them as she pushed away the aching of her cut and bruised pelt to prepare for another

fight.

Frostpaw's ears pricked.

The sounds of paw-steps echoed under the growls and hisses of fighting, and the gorse barrier behind the SkyClan she-cats begun to shake. Frostpaw felt a heavy, stone weight fall into her belly.

Snake-dung, no! Not more SkyClan.

They would be completely overrun.

Her eyes wide with fear, Frostpaw glanced at Pinepaw. She saw the same worry shining back at her from Pinepaw's amber eyes. A stream of new cats burst from the gorse tunnel, yowling haunting battlecries. But, Frostpaw felt a jolt of surprise and relief when she recognized the long-legged tabby tom at the head of the patrol.

"Sedgestar!" Pinepaw yowled joyfully.

The fresh ShadowClan warriors fell on the SkyClan cats. Frostpaw saw Larchtail shrink back hesitantly and fear light in Suneyes' bright golden gaze at their appearance. Pinepaw sprung at Larchtail and Suneyes with an eager snarl, renewed vigor in her step. Frostpaw followed her, a similar surge of energy revitalizing her tired muscles. It was now ShadowClan's battle to win, and SkyClan knew it.

"Fox-dung!" Paledusk's voice yowled, ringing through the camp. *"Fall back, SkyClan! Fall back!"*

The SkyClan cats began to scramble, abandoning their attack. The ones closest to the gorse tunnel managed to sprint away, shoving their way through it. Morningstar reared his head back, his long grey fur tangled and matted in blood, and his eyes as wild as a mad dog's.

"Don't let those fox-hearts get away so easily! Block the tunnel! Make them pay!" the ThunderClan leader howled.

Frostpaw watched the strange turn of events unfold before her. Now, instead of ThunderClan fighting desperately to drive SkyClan

out of the camp, ThunderClan warriors scrambled to block the gorse tunnel with their bodies, in order to trap the retreating SkyClan inside.

For a moment, Frostpaw spotted the look of bewilderment on Sedgestar's face at Morningstar's command, but her view of him was quickly cut off as a charge of retreating SkyClan cats blocked him from sight. Frostpaw attention was snapped back to her immediate surroundings when Pinepaw leapt towards Larchtail and Suneyes, apparently determined to drive them off. Frostpaw followed her, hissing and slashing at the SkyClan cats. They retreated backwards, their faces uncertain as they searched for a way to flee.

"Screw it," Suneyes snarled, turning to dive into the prickly gorse, fighting her way through the bush, and finally pushing out the other side.

After a moment of hesitation, Larchtail followed her through the gorse, sending a final poisonous look at Frostpaw and Pinepaw as she did so. Frostpaw looked around, seeing other SkyClan warriors doing the same in a last-ditch effort to escape the camp. Frostpaw watched as Paledusk ran off as well. The SkyClan deputy didn't even hesitate before diving into the thick gorse tangles. Frostpaw watched as his long white fur got caught in the thorns, but he shouldered his way through the bush. Soon the sounds of fighting faded, as the last SkyClan warriors broke through the gorge barrier and fled into the forest. The ThunderClan cats and ShadowClan cats stood still, in silence for a moment. No victorious cheers were raised from the ThunderClan side. Not even wails of anger or cries for the bodies of cats that lay scattered through out the camp. Frostpaw felt a twinge of relief that she didn't recognize any of those pelts.

It was the ShadowClan cats who began to move first. As if it was instinctive, they began to cluster around Sedgestar. Frostpaw saw Swoopstrike supporting a limping Dappledpelt with his shoulder as they headed over. She also spotted Redclaw creeping out of the ThunderClan nursery, soothing a young, crying ThunderClan kit that came stumbling out behind her. Pinepaw padded straight towards Sedgestar, her chin held high. Frostpaw walked over to her leader as well, limping as her bruises and scratches suddenly began

aching more fiercely as the adrenaline of battle faded from her body.

Then the gorge barrier began to shake again, and Frostpaw immediately tensed once more, turning towards the tunnel, but the cats that came running through were only a patrol of bedraggled ThunderClan warriors, with Acornear at the rear. The ThunderClan deputy looked around at the disaster of the camp; his eyes wide with shock and horror.

"Frostpaw!"

Autumnpaw was bounding up to her, his eyes wide. Besides a scratch on his nose, he seemed no worse for wear.

"Are you all okay?" he asked, concern in his gaze. "Is Pinepaw here? Where's Pinepaw? And, Redclaw?"

"I'm okay," Frostpaw meowed. "They're okay too. I was just with Pinepaw, and I saw Redclaw just a heartbeat ago."

Autumnpaw heaved a sigh of relief, walking with her a few tail-lengths closer to where the rest of ShadowClan was grouping before sitting down heavily.

"It's a good thing you and Sedgestar's patrol arrived when you did," Frostpaw muttered, gingerly taking a seat next to him to avoid aggravating her bruises.

Autumnpaw leaned over and began to groom some of her blood out of her shoulder fur. Frostpaw winced when his tongue scraped over the scratches there.

"I was afraid SkyClan was going to tear us apart without more backup," she continued in a low voice. "How'd Sedgestar know that we needed up?"

"ThunderClan sent a runner as soon as the attack began here. Barredpaw, I think it was. He told us their camp was under attack without enough warriors, because they had patrols out, and your patrol was still out," Autumnpaw said, leaning back from grooming to gaze at her seriously for a moment.

"I was so scared about what happened to you. I mean— all of you," he amended quickly. "Redclaw and Pinepaw too. The way Barredpaw made it sound, I thought we'd make it here to find ThunderClan dead, and you all slaughtered somewhere in their territory."

Frostpaw's ears flattened.

If SkyClan had it their way, that might not be too far off the mark.

Frostpaw's attention was drawn away from Autumnpaw when she saw Sedgestar make his way out of the crowd of ShadowClan cats and pad over to Morningstar. The ThunderClan leader was hunched over the body of a grey tom, his shoulders taunt with grief. Frostpaw saw the medicine cat Fallowtuft pad up to Morningstar with herbs in his jaws to use on Morningstar's many wounds, but Morningstar sent him away with a mutter to treat everyone else before him. Sedgestar walked over to Morningstar's shoulder, where he stood in silence for a moment. Morningstar didn't look up.

"Morningstar..." Sedgestar murmured, drawing the ThunderClan leader's attention to him.

"It should have been me," Morningstar said, his voice so low that it barely reached Frostpaw's ears. "Rockstorm was so young; his whole life ahead of him. While I have many lives to use..."

Morningstar suddenly jerked his head up, rising to his feet with his eyes burning with hatred and grief.

"SkyClan has gone too far this time! The time for border skirmishes is over!" Morningstar snarled. "If SkyClan wants war, that's what we will give them! Our next battle goes to them, in *their* camp."

Sedgestar's eyes widened a bit in concern at Morningstar's unhinged expression.

"Morningstar, let's talk about this," he said in an even voice. "If we think—"

"No!" Morningstar spat, beginning to pace with his tail bristled and lashing. "They killed my cats, in our home! We will go to war *today*.

Launch an attack on their camp."

"Today? At least let your cats rest for now. They are wounded and tired," Sedgestar pointed out, his voice low.

This seemed to bring Morningstar back to himself, at least, somewhat. Frostpaw saw a shadow of doubt flash on his face, but only for a moment.

"But, so are SkyClan's," Morningstar stubbornly persisted. "That's why they won't be expecting it. And, besides, you still have a patrol of fresh warriors. SkyClan fled quickly as soon as the patrol you led showed up."

Sedgestar's eyes narrowed, the gentle empathy that had been on the ShadowClan leader's face vanishing like morning fog on a sunny day.

"I won't put my cats in that kind of danger. Some of my warriors already fought one battle for you today. I will not make them fight another," Sedgestar said, his voice cold.

Morningstar's ears flattened, and his lips curled back into a snarl.

"Are you backing out of our deal?" Morningstar said, turning on Sedgestar to snarl in his face. "Three moons, three battles. That was our promise; I haven't gone over, have I?"

Sedgestar didn't flinch. Frostpaw's claws started curling out of her paws at Morningstar's threatening pose, and all around her she could feel the air tensing between the ThunderClan and ShadowClan cats, like at any moment, a fight could break out between them.

"Morningstar. I think Sedgestar is right," Acornear's voice suddenly cut in.

Morningstar's eyes widened in shock at the interruption as he turned to his deputy. Acornear padded up to him and bowed his head, his eyes filled with shame.

"It's my fault that ThunderClan reinforcements didn't arrive at the

camp in time to help you. Instead of listening to Swoopstrike's hunch that SkyClan was planning an attack on the camp, I charged into battle without thinking. I didn't even consider the possibility that they had sent another patrol to attack the camp. If I hadn't run off, we could've warned the camp before the attack. And, the warriors in *both* my patrol, and Swoopstrike's would've been there to defend it. I'm so sorry," Acornear said.

Frostpaw's eyes sought out Swoopstrike in the crowd of ShadowClan warriors. His chin was raised, but surprisingly, his expression wasn't as smug as she expected. He was studying Acornear with a carefully neutral gaze.

"I don't want us to make this same mistake again," Acornear continued. "We should regain our strength and come up with a plan before attacking. Even if that means delaying the attack for some time. Remember, we still won the battle today; SkyClan is the one on the retreat. We have the time to think about it."

"It's basically leaf-fall already," Morningstar growled. "If we lose the hunting grounds we regained a few moons ago, we will starve this leaf-bare."

"I know," Acornear responded steadily, raising his head to look Morningstar in the eye. "But, we won't lose. SkyClan already showed their biggest advantage—their tree-ambush, so we know to beware of it. We won't delay long enough for them to come up with a better plan. We will strike their camp and deliver the final blow long before that."

Morningstar was silent for a long moment, his tail flicking. Finally, he gave a curt nod.

"We will attack their camp when a half of moon has passed from now," he growled.

Sedgestar nodded at Morningstar.

"I agree with that timeline," Sedgestar meowed.

Morningstar looked at Sedgestar out of the corner of his eyes.

"Thank you for your warriors' help today. But, ThunderClan now needs time to tend to our wounded and grieve our dead. I trust you all can find yourselves to the border," Morningstar said.

Sedgestar gave a single nod and turned, waving his tail to gather his warriors close around him. Frostpaw saw Redclaw slowly walk over to Pinepaw, shooting a final glance over her shoulder at the ThunderClan kit she had been comforting. The kit was now curled against the body of a tabby and white queen, her mother presumably, mewling softly with grief. Pain filled Redclaw's eyes for a moment before the ShadowClan she-cat looked away from the kit, turning instead to Pinepaw. She gently licked some blood off of the dark apprentice's forehead. Frostpaw half-expected Pinepaw to duck away; even when she was a kit, she had always acted eager to be independent of her mother. But, instead Pinepaw just gave a brief purr, blinking at Redclaw with a gentle look in her amber eyes.

Sedgestar led the way through the now mangled gorse tunnel, and ShadowClan headed home.

Calm Before The Storm

Pine branches whipped past over Frostpaw's head as she ran through the forest. A cool leaf-fall breeze stirred her fur, playfully flicking around her ears, but her pelt was warmed by the rising, morning sun. Autumnpaw was only a tail-length away, at her side, matching her with every stride. They had been sent out on their own today; it was a final hunting test on how much prey they could bring back to camp without a warrior's help.

The half moon until the attack ShadowClan had planned with ThunderClan had almost come to pass, but Frostpaw tried to put those thoughts and worries out of her mind, at least for this hunt. Instead, she let herself enjoy the feeling of supple strength in her muscles. They stretched and flexed as she raced through the trees. Her wounds from the battle in ThunderClan's camp had healed fully, so every step was easy. A limber reach forward, followed by a powerful kick backward to propel herself onwards. There was something empowering and satisfying about it. Frostpaw asked her legs to run, and they did so, every motion tireless. She felt like she could run to the moon if she needed.

Frostpaw raised her nose, taking a deep breath of the forest, but she didn't search the air for prey. Instead she just let the sharp, familiar scent of the pines wash over her. Even though leaf-fall was now here, the evergreen color of the pine needles above her were unchanging and as vibrant as they were in green-leaf. The only hint of autumn in ShadowClan's woods was the foggy breath that panted from Frostpaw's and Autumnpaw's mouths and drifted up towards the sky.

Frostpaw shot a glance over at Autumnpaw. She blinked, noticing, somehow for the first time, how grown-up he looked. Frostpaw, Autumnpaw and his litter-mates might have been almost adult sized since they were six-moons old, but it wasn't until now that they were approaching the end of their apprenticeships that they were starting to look like true warriors. As the weather turned cooler,

Autumnpaw's fluffy auburn and white coat had filled out. His muzzle also appeared broader and stronger, making his face look a lot like his father's, Weaseltail's. And, as he had put on muscle from all of the training they've done for moons, he had lost the gangly lankiness he used to have as a young apprentice, filling out into a powerful silhouette.

Frostpaw glanced back forward. She knew many similar changes must have happened to her too. Her coat had certainly thickened into a long pelt that swirled around her like a grey and creamy-white cloud, and her body had also become lean and muscular.

But, the biggest change though, Frostpaw thought, was the comfortableness that she felt in her own skin. Even with the threat of SkyClan, and the battle that was coming quickly, for maybe for the first time in her life, Frostpaw felt... content. As she ran, the sweet, sharp scent of pine in her nose, the cool breeze through her fur, the silent companionship of Autumnpaw at her side, Frostpaw couldn't shake the deep sense of belonging that permeated down into her bones.

Frostpaw raised her muzzle, taking a deep breath of the cool air surrounding her, feeling the springiness of the pine needle covered ground under her paws.

Who cares about SkyClan. Or, Paledusk.

This. This is all I need.

After a while, Autumnpaw slowed his pace, so Frostpaw did too, the two coming to the stop in the thick of the pine forest.

"Should we hunt here?" Autumnpaw asked, tail flicking eagerly behind him.

"This place seems as good as any to me," Frostpaw said.

Autumnpaw led the way, padding off into the trees. Frostpaw followed, right behind him.

"What do you think Beeclaw and Swoopstrike would do to us if we come back empty-pawed?" Autumnpaw asked from over his

shoulder, his amber eyes sparkling with mischief.

Frostpaw heaved a dramatic sigh.

"Well, of course, Beeclaw will look disappointed in you, but say that you'll do better next time. While Swoopstrike will tell me that if I don't go back out there and catch something, he'll cut me up and feed me to the elders instead," Frostpaw said, her tail flicking playfully.

Autumnpaw snickered.

"That's a good one. Hm, but I'd guess that Swoopstrike would actually say that you hunt worse than a new-born kit," Autumnpaw said.

"I think I know my mentor well enough to know what insult he'd use against me," Frostpaw joked, a purr in her voice.

Autumnpaw's eyes lit up.

"Want to bet on it? Once we're done hunting, we should hide our prey outside the thorn barrier and walk into the camp and pretend like we didn't get any," Autumnpaw said with a purr. "Just to see which of us is right. And, the winner can get all of the softest feathers from the loser's nest!"

"What! No way!" Frostpaw huffed, mockingly outraged.

"What? Why not? It'll just be a harmless prank," Autumnpaw said, slowing to walk by her side and widening his eyes at her. "Unless you care about your nest's feathers so much?"

"Maybe it'd be harmless for *you*," Frostpaw purred. "But, are you trying to get *me* killed by Swoopstrike?!"

Autumnpaw bumped her shoulder with his affectionately.

"Aw come on now," he purred. "Swoopstrike would only *threaten* to kill you. He'd never *actually* go through with it. Think about it. How many times now has he said he'd kill you but instead risked his own neck to rescue you from all sorts of trouble you got yourself in?

Rabbitstar, various fights, the river..."

"Hey! I've never gotten myself into trouble!" Frostpaw protested, whirling on him with an air of playful indignation. "Trouble just finds me!"

Autumnpaw purred.

"Okay. Okay," he said, backing away to show he conceded. "You don't *cause* trouble. Still, my point is: After he's gone through all this effort to train you and to save your sorry hide, you really think he'd waste all that hard work now on killing you? When you're nearly ready to be a proper warrior and be out of his fur for good?"

"My *'sorry hide!'*" Frostpaw squeaked offendedly, ignoring the questions and jumping straight to the insult.

"What?" Autumnpaw asked, his tail flicking playfully behind him as his eyes gleamed with mischief. "I bet your hide was very sorry all those times it was being attacked or when it almost drowned in the river."

"You take that back!" Frostpaw huffed, head-butting his shoulder.

Autumnpaw stood firm against her shove, not moving a whisker, still purring.

"But, it's true!" Autumnpaw said.

He twitched his whiskers, tilting an ear towards her in a playfully arrogant way as he remained unyielding.

"You're insufferable," Frostpaw grumbled, stomping around him and starting to walk off into the trees.

"Then why do you keep hanging out with me?" he quipped from behind her.

"Being forced to spend so much time with Swoopstrike has made me masochistic," Frostpaw said, her voice dripping with sarcasm as she looked back at him from over her shoulder.

Autumnpaw laughed hard, his purrs ringing loudly through the trees. He bounded up to her side

"Don't you dare compare me to Swoopstrike. I don't think I've *ever* seen him happy," Autumnpaw said, his amber eyes sparkling. "I'm an absolute ray of sunshine compared to him."

"Oh? So, you can talk about my pathetic hide in need of constant rescue. But, when I make *one* comparison between you and Swoopstrike, who, *as you pointed out just moments ago,* is a good warrior who has often saved me despite risk to himself. *That's* going too far?" Frostpaw teased, widening her eyes at Autumnpaw.

"Well, er— that's not exactly what I meant," Autumnpaw said, back-pedaling quickly. "I mean. I'm gonna be a good warrior too, and of course I'll be there for you if you ever need me—"

"Nope, you're right," Frostpaw said, cutting him off, her tail flicking mischievously behind her. "Thanks for letting me see your real character now. Truly, it's a relief to know. Now I know if I'm ever in trouble, I should find someone else to help me!"

"You know that's not what I meant!" Autumnpaw protested, flattening his ears into a grumpy expression.

Frostpaw just purred, flicked her tail and didn't respond. Instead she took off into the forest, her feet flying.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Autumnpaw shouted after her.

"We're supposed to be hunting right?" Frostpaw said over her shoulder. "But, I'm sure your yowling scared off everything around here! Let's go!"

Autumnpaw caught up to her quickly, his amber eyes bright with competition as he doubled down, putting on a burst of speed. Frostpaw twitched her tail, but she slowed her pace slightly, letting him pass her, watching his paws as his stride crept ahead of hers. The ground was soft and springy under their feet from the layers of moss and pine needles that coated the forest floor. Frostpaw could almost imagine the spring from every step helped propel them

forward faster. As Autumnpaw drew ahead of her, he raised his chin in pride, but Frostpaw flashed out a forepaw, swiping his hind-legs out from under him. Autumnpaw let out a yelp as he tumbled across the spongey ground, head over tail. Frostpaw purred as she out-stripped him, but she came to a stop only a few fox-lengths away from his sprawled form to make sure he hadn't gotten hurt. She turned to see him stumbling back to his paws.

"You snake-heart!" Autumnpaw sputtered as he rose to his feet.

"'In battle, surprise is often more valuable than strength,'" Frostpaw said, twitching her whiskers.

"Don't quote Grovepelt to me!" Autumnpaw growled, flicking moss off of his ears.

Frostpaw searched his expression, making sure that she hadn't gone too far and actually made him angry at her, and she was relieved to see his amber eyes still glowed with warmth.

"Hmph," Autumnpaw grumbled as he padded back over to Frostpaw. "I don't know how cats like Dampfang can be so cotton-brained. Because you're clearly the most black-hearted, ShadowClan-natured cat of us all."

Frostpaw knew Autumnpaw was teasing, but still hearing that he thought she was ShadowClan-natured touched Frostpaw deeply, more deeply even than she suspected he intended. She felt a rush of warm pride in her chest, and she raised her chin. Autumnpaw nudged her shoulder with his muzzle.

"You're a sneaky snake," he said, his voice teasing.

"At least I'm not a slow-tail," Frostpaw shot back, poking his fluffy chest with a paw.

"What! I was winning before you tripped me!" Autumnpaw protested.

"I let you pass me so I could trip you," Frostpaw responded, her blue eyes glinting.

Autumnpaw groaned.

"Out of all the cats in the forest, why does my best friend have to the most heartless?" he lamented.

Frostpaw just purred in response, giving a shrug. They stood for a moment together in companionable silence. Frostpaw gazed out into the forest around her, feeling the slight chill in the breeze on her whiskers. Her gaze flickered back to Autumnpaw, to see him already staring at her. He blinked at her as their eyes met. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but Frostpaw beat him to it.

"Well, we better actually get hunting," Frostpaw said her voice taking back on a serious tone. "Or, else we'll be stuck out here all day."

Autumnpaw tilted his head.

"But, the weather is beautiful. It feels like it's just the two of us and the whole forest. Would being stuck out here together all day be so bad?" he asked, his amber eyes searching hers.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed in confusion.

"But, I told Swoopstrike—"

Autumnpaw looked away from her, his ears flattening.

"I know, Frostpaw," he said quickly, interrupting her.

There was a hint of something, frustration or impatience or even hurt maybe, in his voice. Frostpaw knew Autumnpaw could be hot-tempered, just like his mother Redclaw and his sister Pinepaw. She had seen his temper flare countless times when he got into spats with Dampfang or Poolpaw or Pinepaw. But, he always seemed to have an infinite supply of patience for her. Frostpaw's ears flattened, feeling her chest tighten as her uncertainty deepened.

What did I do wrong?

Autumnpaw glanced back over to her, and his eyes softened as he

read her expression. He touched his nose to her ear in a reassuring way.

"Never mind; you're right. Let's get hunting," he said, drawing away, his tail perking up as he seemed to return to his normal cheerful self.

Frostpaw hesitated for a moment, but then she followed him, putting the strange encounter out of her mind.

They returned to camp with jaws full of prey. There weren't many reptiles to be seen, but the weather had not yet turned cool enough to scare away the mice, squirrels and birds that lived in the ShadowClan forest. As they padded through the thorn barrier surrounding camp, Frostpaw was surprised to see many cats gathering in the clearing and Sedgestar standing on top of the Clanrock. Swoopstrike padded up to Frostpaw, giving a curt nod at the prey in her jaws.

"Well done. Put that down, then come over. Sedgestar's called a clan meeting to talk about the SkyClan battle," he meowed.

Frostpaw and Autumnpaw nodded as Swoopstrike turned and walked back over to the crowd of cats. Autumnpaw and Frostpaw quickly put their prey in the fresh-kill pile and headed over to take a seat. Sedgestar waited until they had settled before speaking.

"It's almost been a half moon since the battle in ThunderClan's camp. Morningstar is eager to retaliate against SkyClan, and requests our help with an attack on SkyClan's camp," Sedgestar said.

His words were met with silence. All of the clan was well aware of this. They had spent all the precious time they had since the ThunderClan camp battle preparing for it.

"This will be the last battle we will aid ThunderClan with," Sedgestar said. "I know some of you aren't pleased with all the help we've had to give them, but I promised Morningstar three battles in three moons. And, I intend to keep my word. Of course battles are dangerous, but we are the strongest Clan in the forest. I don't think we need to fear SkyClan."

Frostpaw gazed up at Sedgestar, wondering how much of his words he truly believed.

In the ThunderClan camp battle, Frostpaw knew SkyClan had killed at least three ThunderClan cats, and she knew those deaths could very well happen to ShadowClan cats instead. ShadowClan wasn't invulnerable.

Frostpaw shuddered. The line between life and death sometimes seemed so thin. Autumnpaw studied her face, shooting her a concerned look, but Frostpaw just gave a small head shake at him, waiting for Sedgestar to finish.

"I spoke with Morningstar on the border a few sunrises ago, and we agreed that we will launch the attack this evening, at sunset," Sedgestar said. "I will personally lead the ShadowClan battle patrol."

Grovepelt, who had been calmly sitting at the base of Clanrock next to Clearstream and Elmclaw, rose to his paws then, his ears pricked in surprise.

"Sedgestar, may I please interrupt for a moment?" Grovepelt meowed.

Sedgestar dipped his head to his deputy.

"Of course, Grovepelt," he meowed, his voice deep with respect.

"I wasn't aware that you were planning on leading the patrol yourself, and I must object," Grovepelt said, his green eyes staring intently at Sedgestar. "Although we've been allied with Morningstar, we mustn't forget that this is still ultimately a war between ThunderClan and SkyClan. Don't you think it would send the wrong message to Fennelstar if a ShadowClan patrol led by you attacks his camp? Is Morningstar even planning on being there, leading the ThunderClan patrol?"

Sedgestar flicked his ears dismissively.

"Who Morningstar chooses to be on his patrol is his own business," Sedgestar meowed before, in a rare public display of emotion, his

face softened with fondness as he looked down at Grovepelt. "And, my old friend, I didn't discuss this with you because I knew you were sure to make a sensible point like this. But, unfortunately, I've already made up my mind. As you know, fighting a clan in their own camp is very different than fighting out in their territory. Cats are more desperate to defend their dens, kits, and elders. They're more dangerous. I'm asking my warriors to risk greater harm, and not just for our clan's sake, but ThunderClan's too. What kind of leader would I be if I was not willing to do the same?"

Grovepelt dipped his head in concession to Sedgestar, clearly seeing that he would not change the stubborn ShadowClan leader's mind.

"Noble frog-brain," Clearstream murmured just loud enough for the crowd to hear and a wave of *mrrows* rippled through ShadowClan.

Sedgestar twitched his whiskers good-naturedly as his Clan laughed, their mood lightened at least for a moment.

"Just a warning; if any one of you, of course, besides my medicine cats or my lovely mate, tries to call me 'frog-brain,' you'll be on tick patrol for a moon," Sedgestar said, a purr in his voice.

Sedgestar waited until the purring dissipated, the mood sobering once more.

"This clan meeting is over, but don't go anywhere yet. I will speak to the cats that I've chosen to join me on the battle patrol," Sedgestar said.

He bounded down from the Clanrock, padding into the crowd of clan-mates that quickly gathered around him. Autumnpaw flicked his ears towards the fresh-kill pile, drawing Frostpaw's attention to him.

"Want to grab a bite while Sedgestar is making the rounds? I'm sure someone else already fed the queens and elders while we were out this morning. And, I think we've earned a meal after all the hunting we did," Autumnpaw said.

Frostpaw's stomach growled in agreement, and she nodded. They

padded across camp to the fresh-kill pile, and spotted Pinepaw and Poolpaw heading their way too, evidently having the same idea. Poolpaw waved his fluffy black-and-white tail in greeting to Autumnpaw and Frostpaw.

"Hey! How went your hunt this morning?" Poolpaw asked, his eyes taking on a playful gleam. "After Pinepaw's and my hunt last evening, I'd be surprised if there was any prey left in the forest for you two."

"It was pretty good," Frostpaw meowed quietly, trying to hold on to the peaceful feeling that she had this morning before her mind had been once more filled with thoughts of battle.

"It went perfect. See for yourself," Autumnpaw boasted, puffing his chest out as he gestured to the large fresh-kill pile. "All the prey here is freshly caught by me and Frostpaw."

Poolpaw wrinkled his nose, bending down to give the pile a deep sniff.

"I don't know... some of these mice smell pretty stale to me," Poolpaw teased.

"Stale? You must just be smelling your own breath," Autumnpaw said, giving Poolpaw a shove.

"You're one to talk," Poolpaw shot back. "I have to hold my breath anytime you so much as speak to me. I think you need to see Clearstream because you have a problem."

Autumnpaw gave a playful growl, falling into a crouch and wiggling his hindquarters as he readied himself to spring. Pinepaw heaved an exaggerated sigh.

"Will you two knock it off?" she huffed. "We may be fighting in a battle later today; don't waste your energy shoving each other into the dirt!"

Frostpaw twitched an ear, privately agreeing with Pinepaw.

Autumnpaw growled again, but irritably this time. He did

straighten though, apparently having seen the wisdom in her words.

"Well the mighty Pinepaw has spoken, so we must obey," Poolpaw said, turning back to Autumnpaw with eyes wide with mock seriousness. "Truce?"

"Truce," Autumnpaw agreed.

Frostpaw purred softly to herself. She knew the "truce" wouldn't last. In fact, she wondered if Poolpaw and Autumnpaw would ever outgrow their mock fights. She could imagine them in the elders den together, squabbling over who gets the best basking spot in the sunlight.

The focus shifting back towards food, each apprentice chose a piece of fresh-kill for themselves and settled down near the fresh-kill pile to eat. Frostpaw munched quietly on the mouse she picked, half-listening to Poolpaw and Autumnpaw continue their now subdued banter, and half-thinking about the impending battle. It wasn't until she was close to done with her meal that Frostpaw realized Pinepaw was being unusually quiet. The dark apprentice was eating a robin in silence, her brow furrowed. Although Pinepaw had rebuked Autumnpaw and Poolpaw once, normally by now she would have at least told them to put a mouse in it again, or gotten in on the argument, informing them that, actually, they both have entirely repulsive breath.

"Are you thinking about something?" Frostpaw murmured, not loud enough to interrupt Autumnpaw and Poolpaw's conversation, but loud enough for Pinepaw to hear.

Pinepaw pricked her ears in surprise.

"...Thinking about cuffing them both if they don't shut up," Pinepaw growled, flicking her tail at Autumnpaw and Poolpaw, her eyes gleaming wickedly.

Frostpaw gave a quiet purr.

There's the Pinepaw I know.

But, then Pinepaw's brow furrowed again. Her face turned serious,

and she glanced away from Frostpaw.

"I was also thinking about the battle actually," she murmured in a low voice, down at the robin between her paws. "I think we're doing too much for ThunderClan. I know Sedgestar promised to help them, but he promised to help them *defend* their land. Not launch an attack in another clan's camp. I've just been thinking about what Grovepelt said. How it'll send a bad message to SkyClan."

Frostpaw felt cold worry stirring in her chest at Pinepaw's words.

"Do you think this'll start a war between ShadowClan and SkyClan?" Frostpaw whispered.

Pinepaw shrugged.

"Maybe. I don't know," she muttered.

Pinepaw sighed. She stared out into camp. Pinepaw's face still seemed troubled, like she had more to say, but empty silence stretched out between them again. Frostpaw looked away from her, and down at the scraps of mouse between her grey-striped paws. Pinepaw had said more than Frostpaw had expected at least. It was a good effort.

"There's no good way out of it anyway," Pinepaw continued suddenly, making Frostpaw's ears prick in surprise. "If Sedgestar refuses to attack SkyClan's camp, Morningstar calls him a snake-hearted oath-breaker, and then we've got ThunderClan and maybe SkyClan to contend with..."

Pinepaw's voice trailed off.

"And, if we attack, we make SkyClan furious," Frostpaw added for her.

"Yeah... Either way, someone is going to be really pissed at us. So, I guess, why worry?" Pinepaw said, giving a bitter purr.

Frostpaw twitched her tail, but her attention was drawn away from Pinepaw as Sedgestar and Grovepelt came padding over to the group of apprentices. Autumnpaw and Poolpaw quickly silenced

their conversation as the leader and deputy approached.

"Grovepelt and Fogfur told me that you two did excellent on your hunts last night," Sedgestar said to Poolpaw and Pinepaw, who both dipped their heads respectfully to him.

"And, I heard from Beeclaw and Swoopstrike that you two did exemplary as well," Sedgestar said, turning to Frostpaw and Autumnpaw.

Autumnpaw and Frostpaw bowed their heads to him too. Frostpaw's pelt warmed at his praise, despite the worry about SkyClan nesting in her chest. Grovepelt was nodding along with Sedgestar's words.

"There is little more that we can teach them," Grovepelt added, his green eyes bright. "They have proven themselves to have true ShadowClan spirits— fierce, shrewd, strong and clever. I am very proud of you all."

Frostpaw could almost feel the ripple of joy that went through Pinepaw's pelt at her mentor's words. Pinepaw raised her chin, her amber eyes shining. Frostpaw studied her from out of the corner of her eye.

She hardly seems like the same cat who, the day that she was apprenticed, complained about being given a mentor "as old as dirt."

Sedgestar gave a deep, pleased purr.

"That's very good. Then it's decided. Your last act as apprentices will be to join me on this battle patrol. When we get back to camp, I will hold your warriors' ceremonies. As is ShadowClan tradition, you will be given your names after the setting of the sun so you may be welcomed into the shadows," Sedgestar said.

"Is the battle a final test?" Poolpaw asked, his tail-tip twitching a bit anxiously.

Sedgestar shook his head.

"I like to give our apprentices the ability to prove their merits in battle before their warrior ceremonies, but it isn't a test because

there's no way to fail," Sedgestar said with a soft purr. "I know you all will fight valiantly."

Sedgestar turned and began to walk away, Grovepelt following.

"Grovepelt?" Pinepaw asked, and the deputy paused, turning to glance back at her. "Will you be on the battle patrol with us?"

Grovepelt shook his head.

"Sedgestar wants me to stay here, in charge of the cats left in camp," Grovepelt meowed.

"Oh. Okay," Pinepaw meowed, her ears drooping slightly.

Frostpaw glanced at her, detecting a hint of disappointment in her tone.

Maybe she wanted her mentor see her fight in her last battle as an apprentice.

Grovepelt's green gaze softened as he looked down at Pinepaw.

"You don't need me there. I know you are capable," Grovepelt meowed.

Pinepaw pricked her ears again, her jaw setting determinedly.

"Still, the stories that the elders tell about your battles as a young warrior are legendary!" Poolpaw interrupted. "It's a shame we won't be able to see you fight in a real battle."

Grovepelt glanced at Sedgestar, who had paused and turned back to wait for Grovepelt. The deputy leaned in towards the apprentices confidentially.

"I think Sedgestar thinks I'm too old and frail now to risk being sent into battle," Grovepelt said with a quiet purr.

"I would never dare call you old," Sedgestar said quickly, his brow furrowed.

Grovepelt gave a rough purr as he straightened again.

"You may not say it, but your actions make clear that you think it," Grovepelt meowed as he padded back over to Sedgestar.

Sedgestar opened his mouth as if to protest, but Grovepelt just laid his tail over his shoulders.

"Peace, Sedgestar. I'm only teasing. There's no need for you to say it because I know it's true, and *I* have no problem saying it," Grovepelt meowed. "Truthfully, my old bones are grateful you told them to stay in camp."

Sedgestar shook his head, giving a purr that sounded half amused and half exasperated.

"You know, staying in camp is an important job. We can't leave the kits and elders vulnerable to attack," Sedgestar said as the two of them padded away together. "I'm not just leaving you here so you can rest."

"Of course," Grovepelt said a purr in his voice, as the apprentices watched them leave.

Poolpaw took another bite of his food, chewing thoughtfully.

"They're funny together," Poolpaw said once the leader and deputy were out of earshot. "You know, I think Grovepelt's right. Sedgestar does fret around him like a worried mother goose. He just tries really hard to hide it."

"Grovepelt knows more about the forest and the other clans than any other cat in this camp," Pinepaw snapped at her brother. "He's one of ShadowClan's most valuable assets, of course Sedgestar wants to make sure he stays safe!"

"Woah, hey, calm down," Poolpaw said holding a paw up in surrender. "I wasn't saying that Grovepelt's not."

Pinepaw glared sourly at Poolpaw, her tail-tip twitching.

"Frostpaw."

Frostpaw's ears pricked, her attention pulled from Pinepaw and Poolpaw. She turned to see Swoopstrike padding up to her. He jerked his chin sharply to the side, indicating for her to follow him a bit aways from the other apprentices. Frostpaw quickly scraped some earth over the scraps of her meal, and rose to her paws. With a tail-wave of farewell to Autumnpaw, Poolpaw, and Pinepaw, she followed Swoopstrike away from them and across the camp, to a secluded area under an overhang of the thorn barrier. In the shadows beneath the thorns, Swoopstrike took a seat at her side and turned to look out over the camp.

"What's up?" Frostpaw asked, settling down in a crouch beside him, tucking her paws underneath her.

"Did Sedgestar tell you the news?" Swoopstrike said, his green gaze unreadable and still fixed straight ahead.

"About the battle? Yeah," Frostpaw meowed.

"And, about today being your last day as an apprentice?" Swoopstrike asked with an impatient eye-roll.

"Oh, yeah... That too," Frostpaw amended, giving a small purr.

She fell into silence for a moment.

Last day as an apprentice...

Something about the way Swoopstrike said that stuck in her head. It suddenly felt so real, so imminent. She would be a full ShadowClan warrior before the next sunrise. She would finally catch the thing she had chased for so long. That she worked so hard for, more so than even her den-mates, that she had finally proven herself worthy of...

"My last day as an apprentice," Frostpaw echoed quietly, as she also stared out into camp, her mind far away from her body.

But, her attention was drawn back to the moment as she felt Swoopstrike fidgeting beside her, shifting his weight from paw to paw like he was sitting on a stinging ant pile. He was still staring out into camp, but his expression was uncomfortable and pinched.

Frostpaw glanced at him, her brow furrowing at his twitching. But, before she could ask if he was okay, her mentor suddenly heaved a sigh.

"Alright. So, Snakeeyes and Dappledpelt might *actually* flay me alive if I don't tell you this while you're still my apprentice," Swoopstrike said haltingly, looking like each word was painfully dragged out of his throat like a stinging nettle. "And, today's your last day... so, I... just— here it goes—"

"I was wrong."

Frostpaw blinked rapidly, utterly nonplussed.

"I... I don't understand," she said, almost apologetically because Swoopstrike's pained expression made him look like he'd rather pull out his own claws than elaborate.

Swoopstrike sighed again, his ears flattening. Frostpaw felt another jolt of surprise when she detected an emotion in his expression that she'd never seen on his face before— regret.

"The way I treated you as a kit, and then when you first became my apprentice," Swoopstrike said, his eyes locked straight ahead of him, as if he couldn't bear to make himself look at her. "I was wrong. I'm... sorry."

Dumbfounded, Frostpaw's jaw opened, but no sound came out. Truthfully, out of all of the things on this vast earth, the *last* thing she *ever* expected to come out of Swoopstrike's mouth was an apology. It shocked her so much, she didn't even know how to respond. Did she say it was okay? Did she say that she forgave him? Or, ask him if he had hit his head *really hard* this morning?

But, she was spared from answering when Swoopstrike continued.

"You're a good cat," he said in a rough mumble. "And, a ShadowClan cat in every way that counts."

Frostpaw attempted to swallow as her throat closed up in emotion. Her chest tight, she glanced up at him, searching Swoopstrike's face, but he still wouldn't look at her. Swoopstrike stood brusquely then.

"Get some rest. I'll see you at the battle patrol," he said, striding off.

"I— um— okay..." Frostpaw finally managed to meow.

He had already walked away.

Crashing Thunder

The ShadowClan and ThunderClan patrols prowled silently through the quickly darkening forest. The sun was still setting, but the thick ThunderClan canopy blotted out most of the light, shrouding the cats in inky blackness. Frostpaw blinked her eyes, adjusting to the low light as her gaze flitting around the many cats surrounding her.

She was flanked by Swoopstrike and Autumnpaw, one of each side of her. Beeclaw, Weaseltail and Poolpaw weren't far away, only a tail length behind. Sedgestar was at the head of the patrol, Darkpelt only a step behind him in the the deputy's customary spot, and Dampfang only a step behind Darkpelt, as if he wished he was running point instead of his father. To Frostpaw's small surprise, Pinepaw wasn't hovering immediately around Dampfang, instead she was directly in front of Frostpaw, stalking between Dappledpelt and Hootflight.

The ThunderClan patrol next to them was headed by Morningstar. He had brought Acornear, Pineclaw, Beechfur, Foxbite, Nettlepelt and Hazelpaw with him. Frostpaw noted the ThunderClan patrol was about half the size of the ShadowClan one. But, Frostpaw reasoned, they did have a smaller clan, and after SkyClan's vicious attack on their camp less than a moon ago she could hardly blame Morningstar for leaving a well armed guard back at home.

Frostpaw's tail twitched. Although, more ShadowClan cats in the battle meant it was more likely that ShadowClan cats would get hurt instead of ThunderClan ones... Frostpaw gave her ears a small shake as if she could shake such dark thoughts out of her head.

Morningstar raised his tail to halt the patrols for a moment when they reached the border between ThunderClan and SkyClan territory. Frostpaw opened her mouth, drinking in the scents of the forest. Although she could tell that the border was here from the overwhelming smell of the ThunderClan and SkyClan scent markers, the forest in front of her and behind her looked exactly the same. It was nothing like the clearly defined borders of ShadowClan

territory— the thunderpath separating them from ThunderClan, and the edge of the forest marking the border with WindClan.

No wonder SkyClan and ThunderClan are always fighting over land! Their territories look identical.

Morningstar nodded, and the patrols were off again, crossing over the border. Frostpaw's paws prickled with nervousness as they slunk through SkyClan land.

Sedgestar had left all the tactics of the battle to ThunderClan. So, besides Sedgestar's normal rules about not harming elders, kits or medicine cats, the ShadowClan patrol was completely following ThunderClan's lead. Frostpaw saw the wisdom in it; if ShadowClan decided this battle's tactics, they would be disadvantaged because ThunderClan would learn how they thought about planning battles. But, it still made her nervous because the extent of ThunderClan strategy seemed to be: hit the SkyClan camp. *Hard.*

Frostpaw's tail fluttered anxiously behind her. Autumnpaw's gaze flashed as he noticed, and he shot her a questioning look. She put her mouth close to his ear, making sure her words were softer than a whisper of the wind.

"I feel naked without a proper plan," she murmured. "It's like we're charging into battle blind."

Autumnpaw playfully rolled his eyes.

"StarClan, you're starting to sound just like Grovepelt!" he breathed back.

Frostpaw rolled her eyes back in response, feeling a flicker of annoyance that he wasn't taking her concerns seriously. His feathery tail swept over her side, and he shot her a look of reassurance.

Relax. It'll be fine, Autumnpaw's eyes said.

Frostpaw silently mimed an annoyed huff in response.

The ThunderClan patrol padding beside them wasn't doing anything

to assuage her fears either. They walked so loudly! Compared to the ShadowClan patrol, they sounded like a horde of badgers trampling through the forest.

How do they even manage to catch prey?! I guess with all the undergrowth in their territory to hide them, they have to worry less about being quiet?

Frostpaw knew she wasn't the only one bothered by it. Swoopstrike was scowling and his ears kept rotating in the ThunderClanners' direction. She could tell by the dangerous glimmer in his eyes that a thousand sharp insults were swirling on the tip of this tongue. But, he wasn't able to say anything because Sedgestar and Morningstar had specified silence during the ambush.

Morningstar was navigating for both patrols now, guiding them to the SkyClan camp. Frostpaw and many other ShadowClan cats had never seen it before, but Morningstar had described it well when their patrols had met at the ThunderClan camp.

One side of the camp was completely impassable because it was formed by a steep gorge wall. There was no way to enter from that direction; the cliff was too tall and too treacherous to climb down from the top. The SkyClan dens were located in cracks and caves in the cliff-face, and on the opposite side of the camp was a cliff that had long since crumbled. It was now only a wall of rubble and boulders, including one that Fennelstar apparently used to call meetings from. It would be possible to enter that way, but challenging to navigate over the rubble. By far the easiest route of entry would be the camp borders between the cliff and the rubble. Thick bramble bushes grew there, overhanging a small stream that trickled through the center of the camp. The main entry point into the camp was through a narrow tunnel in the bramble bushes, but Morningstar suspected that some cats would be able to force their way into the camp on the opposite side as well, by wading through the stream and ducking under the bushes.

The idea was that when they reached the camp, the patrols would split— the ThunderClan patrol overwhelming the camp guards and entering through the tunnel, while the ShadowClan patrol slipped in the other side.

The sound of thunder rumbled in the distance, and Frostpaw's eyes flickered upwards. In the gaps between the leaves, she could see the dark clouds of what would likely be the last thunderstorm of the warm seasons. A few moments later, the patter of rain filled the forest. Frostpaw flinched as the droplets wiggled their way from the canopy to fall down on the cats, one striking her right on the top of her head.

She shook her ears irritably. Although she had tried to get used to water during the swampy green-leaf season they had, her fall in the river had only succeeded in cemented her hatred for it.

The rain began to pour down. Frostpaw noticed the ThunderClan patrol was also grimacing silently, but the rest of ShadowClan patrol seemed unbothered, water dripping easily from their pelts. Frostpaw gave a small shiver. It was just chilly enough that night for the water to feel cold.

Frostpaw raised her nose, sniffing at the air. Although the water dampened scents, she could still detect the smell of SkyClan growing stronger. Morningstar stopped the patrols for a moment and nodded at Sedgestar. Sedgestar nodded back, and he and Morningstar split off in separate directions, their cats following them. A shudder of anticipation ran through Frostpaw, and she unsheathed her claws. They must be very close to the camp now.

The ShadowClan patrol came across a small stream. Sedgestar turned, following the stream until they reached the bramble barrier of the camp. Above the brambles, Frostpaw could make out the cliff in the darkness. The camp was still quiet; the only sounds that of the rain and thunder. Sedgestar flicked his tail, indicating the gap between the stream and the brambles that Morningstar had told them about, but he held the ShadowClan patrol in place, waiting.

It wasn't long before Frostpaw could hear bushes rustling and the muted sounds of wrestling as ThunderClan attacked the SkyClan camp guards.

"ThunderClan attacking!" a voice yowled.

Dampfang took a pace forward, his eyes eager for battle as he went

to duck under the brambles, but Sedgestar flashed his tail out in front of him, stopping him. Dampfang gazed at Sedgestar in confusion.

"Hold on. We'll wait until all the SkyClan warriors are out of their dens," Sedgestar hissed in a whisper. "They'll be fighting ThunderClan, their backs to us."

Loud yowls echoed in Frostpaw's ears. Hisses and snarls joined the chorus of rain and thunder as the battle began in earnest. Sedgestar held the ShadowClan patrol for a few more heartbeats before he surged forward, slipping into the stream like an otter and ducking under the brambles. The rest of ShadowClan followed. Frostpaw winced as she stepped into the cold water, feeling it lapping at her chest, but she was relieved to find it was slow moving and didn't get any deeper. She forced herself forward, ducking under the bramble branches, flinching as they scraped her ears. Then she emerged on the other side.

A flash of lightning lit up the camp for a moment. A wall of SkyClan warriors were in front of her. As Sedgestar predicted, their backs were to the ShadowClan patrol. Instead, they had formed a half circle around the ThunderClan cats, who were trapped by the bramble barrier behind them.

The sound of the ShadowClan patrol's splashing in the stream was masked by the pouring rain, and Sedgestar did not utter a noise as he charged forward. ShadowClan silently followed him like ghosts in the darkness.

"Behind you!" some SkyClan cat screeched.

But, the warning came too late, and the first wave of ShadowClan warriors tackled SkyClan.

Now the ShadowClan warriors didn't hold back their yowls. Sedgestar led them; as he clawed at a tabby SkyClan warrior, he threw his head back and let out an eerie, warbling battlecry that rose the fur on Frostpaw's shoulders despite the fact she knew it was coming from her own leader's mouth. Frostpaw and the rest of ShadowClan joined in, screaming haunting cries in voices that

screeched high then fell low, and then went back up again.

It was a standard ShadowClan trick to seed confusion in their enemies, one that Frostpaw had learned early in her training. It should work especially well under these circumstances—with the storm obscuring vision and the rain masking scents, the cries would make SkyClan think there were many more ShadowClan warriors than there actually were.

Frostpaw felt a jolt of vindictive satisfaction as she watched it work perfectly. Panic unraveled the SkyClan defenses, the neat semi-circle they had formed fracturing as cats split and scrambled.

Frostpaw sprung at a nearby SkyClan tabby, landing smack on his back. He bucked and shook his pelt to try to dislodge her, but Frostpaw dug her claws into his fur and skin, snapping at his scruff. He reared up, giving an even more violent jerk, and Frostpaw was finally thrown off, although she took several chunks of his fur with her in her claws. Frostpaw managed to land back on her paws, mud splattering up her legs and sides. Frostpaw curled her lip back in a snarl as the tabby tom lashed his tail, pacing in front of her as he prepared to leap. But, then the ThunderClan warrior Nettlepelt pounced on him from behind, and the two went tumbling off.

Frostpaw glanced around, looking for more opponents. She spotted a shadowy figure slinking through the darkness beneath the cliffs at the edge of the camp not too far from her. Frostpaw bounded after it, growling softly, but she slowed and the growl died in her throat as she grew closer and made out the figure.

It was an old she-cat with long grey fur and white patches. She was thin and walking stiffly. Her long fur was clumped into spikes like she hadn't been grooming herself well these days, although her pelt was heavily scarred, indicating she had been a formidable warrior when she was younger. But, now her green gaze seemed confused as she looked out towards the crowd of fighting cats, her tail twitching anxiously as she paced.

She's an elder. I can't hurt her.

Frostpaw turned aside, about to bound back into the thick of the

battle, when the elder's ears twitched towards her, and her gaze snapped to Frostpaw. For a moment, her green eyes were cloudy, confused, and blank, like she didn't understand what she was looking at. But, then suddenly they cleared and sharpened, fierce anger flooding them.

"You!" the elder croaked with a rusty hiss, arching her back and bristling out her fur.

Frostpaw took a quick pace back.

"I mean you no harm—" she meowed.

"Liar! You fox-hearted she-cat," the elder spat, cutting her off, pacing up to Frostpaw, her claws unsheathed.

Frostpaw took another step back, flattening her ears.

"No, really, I don't! Look, I'll leave now," she said, starting to turn aside.

"You're not going anywhere!" the elder screeched. "I won't let you take him away from me! I won't lose him!"

"I—What?" Frostpaw meowed in confusion. "Take who away?"

The elder snarled, launching herself at Frostpaw without responding. Frostpaw dodged back, but the elder moved with surprising speed despite her age and confusion. The elder pivoted, managing to claw Frostpaw's shoulders as she flashed back.

"I won't fight you!" Frostpaw growled.

The elder lunged at her again, and Frostpaw turned tail and fled. As Frostpaw bounded away she could hear the ragged breathing of the elder behind her as she pursued her.

"Get away from her!"

Frostpaw yelped as she was suddenly bowled over by a streak of tabby fur. Frostpaw tumbled head over tail, the familiar scent of Larchtail flooding her mouth. Larchtail ended up on top, and she

pinned Frostpaw to the muddy ground with unsheathed claws, snarling.

"Of course only a heartless ShadowClan cat would try to attack an elder!" Larchtail snarled.

Snake-dung! SkyClan cats were the ones that killed that ThunderClan elder!

But, Frostpaw knew better than to say that out loud.

"Are you completely frog-brained!" Frostpaw spat. "I wasn't attacking her, she was trying to attack me! Look at my pelt, and look at hers. She doesn't have a scratch on her."

Larchtail narrowed her eyes, but her gaze flicked from Frostpaw to the elderly she-cat, seeing that Frostpaw was right. After Larchtail had knocked Frostpaw away, the frail grey and white she-cat seemed to have forgotten her focus on chasing Frostpaw. She had now wandered a little ways away from them, drifting more into the center of camp, where the fighting was thicker. She gazed around, her eyes clouded with confusion at the writhing cats around her. Frostpaw felt a pang of pity in her chest for the senile, old cat. The SkyClan elder would have no chance if ThunderClan warriors spotted her. She'd get herself killed! ThunderClan wanted blood and vengeance.

"Let me up, Larchtail," Frostpaw said with a growl. "She's clearly old and very confused. Instead of clawing me, we should be getting her out of the fighting before someone less honorable does attack her."

Frostpaw saw Larchtail's eyes narrow, suspicion and altruism battling for dominance in her gaze. Then she sighed sharply, scowling.

"...Fine," Larchtail growled finally, stepping off of Frostpaw.

Frostpaw got back to her paws, shaking mud off of her pelt.

"Birdstrike!" Larchtail called, turning and running up to the elder, with Frostpaw following at few steps behind.

Birdstrike turned towards the sound of her name, looking at Larchtail with the same muddled gaze that she had been gazing around at the battling cats with.

"Doepaw? What's going on?" Birdstrike meowed.

Birdstrike's eyes flickered from Larchtail over to Frostpaw, and her gaze narrowed again.

"You're back!" Birdstrike snarled, hobbling back towards Frostpaw with a growl.

Frostpaw took a step back from her, not wanting to get clawed again, but Larchtail stopped Birdstrike by draping her tail over the elder's shoulders.

"You're supposed to be sheltering in the nursery with the queens, remember!" Larchtail said to the elder, while motioning Frostpaw with her ears to lead the way back towards the cliff.

Larchtail followed Frostpaw as she guided them back towards the edge of camp, avoiding groups of fighting cats. Birdstrike looked at Larchtail, her eyes cloudy with confusion.

"The nursery?" she echoed.

Her green eyes cleared.

"My sons," Birdstrike gasped.

Frostpaw's brow furrowed. This elder seemed much too old and frail to have kits. But, then Frostpaw heard Larchtail give a soft sigh, and she realized it must be a part of her confusion again.

"Yes Birdstrike, your sons. They're waiting for you there," Larchtail said.

For a few heartbeats, it seemed like they would make it to the dens unchallenged, but then Frostpaw spotted a dark form bounding towards Larchtail and Birdstrike.

"Wait!" Frostpaw yowled, leaping in front of it without thinking.

Dampfang came to a screeching stop, his green eyes wide with surprise.

"Frostpaw!" he snarled, his gaze sliding from Frostpaw to Larchtail and Birdstrike behind her.

Birdstrike gazed at Dampfang in confusion while Larchtail bared her teeth

"Protecting SkyClan warriors?! You traitor!" Dampfang spat, looking back down at Frostpaw. "Sedgestar'll have your head for this!"

"I'm not a traitor!" Frostpaw spat furiously, her tail lashing. "Does that elder look like a threat to you?! I'm just trying to get her out of the fighting and save a helpless cat's life!"

Dampfang leaned in close to her. His hot breath hit her face, his mouth reeking of blood scent.

"That cat isn't innocent. She was once a SkyClan warrior! Who knows how much ShadowClan blood she's spilt in the past," Dampfang growled.

"She's so confused that she doesn't even know where she is," Frostpaw growled, stubbornly holding her ground. "And, Sedgestar told us not to harm elders! But, fine. Choose, Dampfang. Are you going to waste your energy murdering an elder in cold blood, or are you going to *actually help* ShadowClan by fighting strong warriors instead?"

Dampfang bared his fangs, glaring over Frostpaw's shoulder towards Birdstrike and Larchtail again before turning his angry green gaze back to her.

"Fine. Save your precious SkyClan elder. But, Sedgestar will be hearing about this. I'll be sure of it," Dampfang snarled before turning and bounding back into the fray.

Frostpaw's stomach clenched at the threat, but she tried to shake it off, leading Larchtail and Birdstrike the rest of the way to the cliff at the edge of the camp. There Larchtail took the lead, padding briskly past Frostpaw, and heading for the caves that studded the

cliff's face. Frostpaw paused at the foot of the cliff. Birdstrike still looked confused, but she followed Larchtail easily up the narrow, almost imperceptible path on the cliff-face. When they reached a small cave's entrance, a tortoiseshell queen's face popped out of the nursery to greet them.

"Thank StarClan, there you are Birdstrike! Thank you, Larchtail. I turned away for one moment, and she was gone," the queen said.

Larchtail just dipped her head, turning to leave as the queen now guided Birdstrike inside the den. Birdstrike turned back to Larchtail.

"Aren't you coming Doepelt? You and Slatewhisker's kits are due soon," Birdstrike asked.

"No Birdstrike. I'm fine," Larchtail said.

The tortoiseshell queen ushered Birdstrike the rest of the way into the den as Larchtail bounded back down the cliff trail to Frostpaw. The two stood facing each other in awkward silence for a moment.

"Birdstrike's safe now," Larchtail muttered.

"We should get back to the battle," Frostpaw said, glancing away from her. "Our clans need us."

"Yeah. Right," Larchtail said.

She turned away and bounded off, evidently not wanting to fight Frostpaw anymore. Frostpaw quickly scanned the battle, looking for her clan-mates. She spotted Autumnpaw's familiar ginger and white pelt nearby, battling a grey SkyClan warrior, and Frostpaw charged forward to help. The grey she-cat ducked Autumnpaw's leap, but she didn't recover from the duck quickly enough to dodge Frostpaw. Frostpaw recognized the cat as Suneyes as she swiped at her face, her paw connecting with Suneyes' cheek. Her head snapped to the side from the solid hit.

Suneyes stumbled, temporarily stunned, as Autumnpaw flashed a paw out, scoring his claws down her flank from behind. Suneyes recovered and flashed towards Autumnpaw for a moment, causing him to leap backwards, out of her reach, then the SkyClan warrior

quickly whipped back towards Frostpaw, hissing. Autumnpaw reared up to slam his fore-paws down on her, but Frostpaw saw a large, pale paw emerge from the darkness behind him and land a powerful blow to unbalanced him, knocking Autumnpaw back to all fours.

Suneyes lunged at Frostpaw, quickly biting her fore-leg, and Frostpaw's attention snapped back to the SkyClan she-cat. Frostpaw yowled as pain stabbed at her ankle, and Suneyes released her, pulling her head back like a snake. Frostpaw unleashed a series of quick swipes at her face, but her claws only brushed fur as the quick she-cat dodged back. Then a familiar voice yowled out in pain, jolting Frostpaw.

Autumnpaw!

Her gaze flicked away from Suneyes to find Autumnpaw bleeding in Paledusk's jaws. Frostpaw's veins ran cold as she saw Paledusk holding him by the scruff, shaking him and slamming him to the ground like a piece of prey. Autumnpaw was snarling and fighting back, clawing out huge chunks of white fur stained red with blood, from Paledusk's chest and shoulders, but the blows seemed to only make the large white cat angrier. Paledusk pinned Autumnpaw, slashing long curved claws towards his stomach.

Frostpaw snarled furiously, surging forward, but suddenly Suneyes was in her way, rearing up to meet her. Frostpaw tackled her, Suneyes' claws digging into her shoulders as they wrestled fiercely. Frostpaw sunk her fangs deeply into Suneyes' side and felt a bitter jolt of satisfaction when the she-cat yowled in pain. Every hair on Frostpaw's pelt bristled with determination as she managed to pin Suneyes beneath her.

I have to get to Autumnpaw!

Frostpaw reared her head up as she heard a familiar battlecry. A silver and black streak tackled Paledusk, knocking him away from Autumnpaw.

Swoopstrike!

Paledusk growled furiously at Swoopstrike, evidently recognizing him from the battle in ThunderClan's camp, but Swoopstrike lashed out at Paledusk just as fiercely, snarling like a tiger as he clawed the SkyClan deputy's face, blood splatting through the air.

Frostpaw felt a huge surge of relief. Swoopstrike had come in the nick of time, like he always did.

Suneyes suddenly buckled under Frostpaw, sending her flying with a powerful kick. Frostpaw gasped in pain as she flew back, slamming against the muddy ground. When she stumbled back to her feet, her sides aching and her paws slipping in the mud, she had lost Autumnpaw and Swoopstrike in the dark sea of surging bodies.

Frostpaw stumbled when something furry suddenly crashed into her from behind. Frostpaw recognized Dappledpelt's scent; she had been shoved into her by a black-furred SkyClan tom. Frostpaw whirled around to face him, leaping in front of Dappledpelt as she recovered, staggering back to her paws. Frostpaw hissed, striking at the tom's face and managing to claw his cheek. He snarled furiously, lunging at her, but Dappledpelt darted around from behind Frostpaw, slashing at his side. His attention snapped to her, and Frostpaw took advantage of his distraction by swiping at his other side. She and Dappledpelt took turns for a few moments slashing and snapping at him from either side, moving too quickly for him to land a hit and driving him backwards. They weren't able to wound him significantly, but Frostpaw could see his tail drooping as he got more and more worn out.

The black tom finally let out a frustrated snarl. Frostpaw saw his gaze latch on to Dappledpelt, focusing all his attention on her. He sprung— a large and powerful leap despite his growing exhaustion, bowling Dappledpelt over and rolling her away from Frostpaw. Frostpaw flashed forward to follow them when a lightning strike lit up the SkyClan camp, and the bright light stunned her for a moment.

A shock jolted Frostpaw as she saw Morningstar and Fennelstar looming over her, only a few tail-lengths away. They were both reared up on their hindpaws and brutally battling each other, blood splattering and fur flying. Both leaders looked out for blood; their

lips curled back in fearsome snarls as they grappled with each other. They swiped their massive paws, every powerful, furious hit fueled by seasons of unresolved grudges.

Frostpaw stumbled away from them as crashing darkness fell over the camp again. Thunder boomed in her ears, shaking her down to her bones. She blinked hard. Shaking her head. Disorientated.

Her hearing came back, and she could scent the battling cats around her. But, she still needed her sight to return.

Frostpaw blinked rapidly, waiting for the shadows in her vision to be driven away. However, before her eyes could readjust to the darkness, another flash of lightning lit up the camp in dazzling silver. She spotted Paledusk's large white figure limping across the clearing, blood and rainwater running down his chest and shoulders, and a familiar silver and black pelt lying limply in the mud near him, half of his fur stained crimson with blood. Frostpaw's eyes widened.

"Swoopstrike," Frostpaw gasped.

The smothering, black wave of night rushed in again. Thunder roared through the forest as Frostpaw sprinted over to her mentor, guided forward only by his scent and the memory of where she had seen him lying. Her chest tightened as she reached him, bending her head to nose his limp side. The musty scent of mud mixed with the harsh tang of blood in her nostrils. A jagged wound snaked across Swoopstrike's throat, and his flanks were a mangled mess of torn flesh and blood. But, she noticed a weak, almost imperceptible, rising and falling of his sides as he continued to breathe.

He's still alive!

"Hang on Swoopstrike," Frostpaw muttered, putting her muzzle close to his ear. "We're going to get you back to camp. We'll get you a medicine cat."

Swoopstrike's eyes half flickered open, glinting dimly in the low light. His gaze met Frostpaw's, and she clenched her jaw, her legs suddenly trembling under her. Rain poured down his fur, gently

washing away the blood that continued to flow from his neck. He seemed like he did not have the strength to raise his head, but slowly, he opened his mouth.

"Frostpaw," Swoopstrike murmured, blood dripping from his lips.

His throat convulsed as he struggled to swallow.

"I'm proud... I'm happy... happy to have had you as my apprentice," he whispered.

He blinked, but his eyes were starting to glaze over, taking on a glassy sheen. The panicked pounding of her heartbeat consumed most of Frostpaw's hearing.

"Swoopstrike, don't—don't—don't talk like that." Frostpaw's voice quavered so much, it was difficult to speak. "I'm still your apprentice *now.* The night's not over yet, right? You're going to be fine."

Swoopstrike sighed, but his expression was peaceful—a look unfamiliar to the irritable warrior's face. Frostpaw's throat tightened as if her windpipe was in the jaws of a fox. She collapsed to the ground next to him, clinging to him with her paws like a kit.

"I still need you, Swoopstrike! Don't leave me! I'm... I'm not ready! I'm not strong enough!" Frostpaw cried, her whole body shaking.

She rasped her tongue frantically down his side in an attempt to rouse him, but he didn't say another word. A choked sob rose in Frostpaw's throat as she pressed her face into his chest. She felt a soft purr rumbling in Swoopstrike's chest as it rose and fell under her cheek as he breathed.

Once.

Twice.

Then nothing.

Frostpaw yanked her head up.

A final soft breath whispered from Swoopstrike's mouth, and the light faded from his green eyes. The purr had gone silent in his throat.

Swoopstrike was dead.

Frostpaw blinked in shock, stumbling back to her feet and jerkily stepping back.

How can he be dead?

Just this morning, he was his normal, grumpy self, scowling at Frostpaw for doing StarClan knows what to annoy him. And, now, in a blink of an eye, he was gone from this world.

Just like May. One night she falls asleep, her side as warm, comforting, and ever present as always. Then the next morning, she was cold and dead. Gone. How can a life be snatched away so quickly?

Frostpaw shook her head fiercely, trying to dislodge the thoughts, but to no avail; they only swirled more and more fiercely in her mind.

Frostpaw's knees gave out from under her as she fell into the mud at her mentor's side. Frostpaw crawled back over to him, burying her face into his shoulder fur again. Swoopstrike's pelt was still warm, but cooling quickly now that the heat from his beating heart had been stifled. Frostpaw felt a quiet, keening whine rise in her throat.

"Fall back, ThunderClan! We've taught them a lesson they won't forget!" Morningstar's voice yowled, jolting Frostpaw back to herself.

"ShadowClan, fall back!" Sedgestar's voice echoed right behind Morningstar's. "Fall back!"

Frostpaw jerked her head up, her brow furrowed. She stumbled to her paws, securing Swoopstrike's scruff in her jaws as gently as possible. Some part of her knew that he couldn't feel pain anymore, but she still tried to avoid his wounds. She dragged him for a few tail-lengths towards the camp's exit, her neck straining, before she

had to stop.

"Help! I need help! I can't carry him alone!" she cried, trying to make sense of the flashing dark shapes around her.

A dark shape came barreling over to her, and she tensed, preparing for a fight, but she sighed in relief as she recognized Weaseltail.

"Frostpaw! What's wrong?" he gasped, searching her with his gaze.

His eyes widened as his gaze dropped from Frostpaw down to Swoopstrike, his former apprentice.

"He's dead," Frostpaw said, her voice coming out low and flat.

Grief welled in Weaseltail's eyes.

"I can carry him," he murmured.

Weaseltail dropped to the ground, nudging himself under Swoopstrike, so the silver dappled tabby lay limply across his shoulders. Weaseltail straightened again, and together he and Frostpaw hurried for the tunnel in the bramble barrier.

"Autumnpaw!" Pinepaw's shrill cry cut through the darkness.

Frostpaw's head twisted in the direction of the cry, the icy grip of fear seizing her heart again.

Autumnpaw... No... No! Not him too.

The same horror and dread Frostpaw felt flooded Weaseltail's expression as his gaze frantically searched the indistinct cat shapes around them, trying to figure out which ones were his kits.

"You take care of Swoopstrike. Pinepaw and I together will be able to get Autumnpaw. I'll make sure he's fine," Frostpaw said, her words coming out as worried pants.

She knew that she had no way of ensuring that Autumnpaw was fine, but the alternative was too horrible to say.

Weaseltail gave a swift, tense nod. His face was pained, but it was clear he knew it would be foolish of him to return to the fray encumbered by Swoopstrike's body.

"Be quick," he said hoarsely.

Frostpaw turned, running towards the cry. A few fox-lengths away from her, she started to make out cat shapes that she recognized. Pinepaw, Beeclaw and Poolpaw were all gathered tightly around Autumnpaw's collapsed ginger and white furred form. Frostpaw sprinted to them, her breaths frantic in her chest.

"Is he alive?" Frostpaw gasped, feeling like her heart had jumped up into her throat.

Autumnpaw was lying in a pool of blood and water, his eyes half-lidded and a long gash down his stomach. He showed no response to Frostpaw's voice.

"Yes, but he's lost a lot of blood," Beeclaw said in a grim voice.

"Take him to the ThunderClan camp."

Morningstar suddenly appeared out of the darkness, bleeding from several slashes down his sides, but still standing steadily.

"We're much closer than your camp. Fallowtuft can tend to him," Morningstar continued.

Beeclaw nodded gratefully at the ThunderClan leader.

"Poolpaw, help me carry him," he said.

Beeclaw and Poolpaw lifted Autumnpaw between them, blood still dripping from his stomach. Then the group ran out of the torn bramble barrier and into the forest.

The mad dash to the ThunderClan camp passed in a blur. Morningstar had yowled for everyone, ShadowClan included, to head back to the ThunderClan camp, and Sedgestar had yowled a confirmation. Frostpaw thought she had managed to spot some other ShadowClan warriors in the forest during their retreat, but

she couldn't get a clear count on their numbers. Luckily though, it seemed like SkyClan wasn't pursuing them.

Frostpaw stuck close to Pinepaw, Poolpaw, Beeclaw and Autumnpaw. It was a bit slow going with them because Poolpaw and Beeclaw had to keep Autumnpaw propped between them, and Frostpaw found herself glancing over at Autumnpaw every few steps to make sure he was still breathing. He was, but the deep wound in his belly hadn't stopped bleeding, leaving a trickle of blood behind them.

The rain began to taper off as the heavy scent of the ThunderClan camp filled the air, and Frostpaw felt a huge surge of relief as the ground started to grow more sandy beneath her paws and slope downwards. They pushed through the gorse barrier, and almost immediately they were greeted by Fallowtuft. He had seemingly been warned of their arrival.

"Take him over here," the brown-and-white medicine cat ordered to Beeclaw and Poolpaw, pointing his muzzle at the fern tunnel that led to the medicine cat's den.

Beeclaw and Poolpaw hurried with Autumnpaw over, with Frostpaw and Pinepaw still at their heels, but Fallowtuft blocked them with a swift swish of his tail in front of them. His eyes quickly flashed over their pelts.

"Don't follow. I need space to work on him. Your injuries can wait," the medicine cat said curtly.

Fallowtuft disappeared quickly into the tunnel, and a few moments later, Poolpaw and Beeclaw were ushered back out. Poolpaw's eyes were wide with worry and his tail flicked anxiously behind him.

"Oh StarClan, please let Autumnpaw be okay," Poolpaw murmured, starting to pace.

Frostpaw padded up to him, pressing her side against his, half to comfort him, and half to comfort herself. He stilled, blinking gratefully at her for the touch. Poolpaw's gaze flickered around the ThunderClan camp, and he suddenly tensed next to Frostpaw.

"Oh no... Frostpaw..." Poolpaw whispered, wrapping his tail around her supportively.

Frostpaw didn't have to look to know that Poolpaw must have seen Swoopstrike's body. Still, she forced her gaze over, swallowing hard. The first thing she noticed was that the rest of the ShadowClan patrol had made it to the ThunderClan camp, which she felt a prick of gratitude for. Most of them stood in a loose group around Swoopstrike, their heads bowed with grief, but Dappledpelt was crouched on the ground, her face buried in Swoopstrike's side.

"It's okay, Poolpaw," Frostpaw murmured, her whiskers drooping. "I already knew. I was with him when he died."

Pinepaw padded over to them, her face creased with grief and concern as she gazed at Frostpaw, but she didn't say anything. Frostpaw gently stepped out from under Poolpaw's tail.

"I'm going to go over there. Let me know if you hear anything from Fallowtuft about Autumnpaw, alright?" Frostpaw meowed.

"Yeah of course," Poolpaw murmured.

Beeclaw had been heading over to the group of ShadowClan warriors too, and Frostpaw trailed behind him.

"Beeclaw," Sedgestar's voice rang out, steady and clear despite the mournful slouch to his shoulders. "Is Autumnpaw with Fallowtuft? Morningstar told me he was severely injured."

"He is, Sedgestar," Beeclaw murmured. "He has a wound across his belly. He wasn't conscious when we brought him over here. He's lost a lot of blood."

"Thank StarClan he's alive," Weaseltail gasped, emotion welling in his amber eyes.

"Do you think we will be able to take him back to camp after Fallowtuft treats him?" Sedgestar asked Beeclaw.

"I would say that's a decision left for Fallowtuft," Beeclaw said with a blink.

Morningstar and Acornear padded over to Sedgestar. Morningstar laid his tail on the ShadowClan leader's back.

"If Autumnpaw is unable to be moved, he is more than welcome to stay in ThunderClan until he's healed," Morningstar said. "We will treat him with the same care we would for one of our own apprentices."

Sedgestar dipped his head to Morningstar.

"Thank you for your generosity Morningstar," Sedgestar meowed. "I trust he is in capable paws with Fallowtuft. Although I do hope he can leave with us tonight. Autumnpaw should be among his friends and family."

Morningstar nodded.

"Of course. I understand," he said.

Acornear's gaze slid past the leaders to rest on Swoopstrike's body. Frostpaw was surprised to see the ThunderClan deputy's ears flattened. With so many harsh words exchanged between the two warriors, she didn't think Acornear would've care about his death at all.

Acornear turned to Sedgestar.

"My condolences," Acornear murmured. "ShadowClan lost a formidable warrior tonight."

Frostpaw quietly padded past the leaders and ThunderClan deputy as they continued to murmur to each other in low tones, coming to Dappledpelt's side. As she crouched next to her, Dappledpelt lifted her head, her eyes dull with grief when she glanced at Frostpaw.

"Hey Frostpaw," she said, her voice rough, but she managed to keep it steady. "Are you okay? No bad injuries?"

Frostpaw shook her head.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me," she muttered.

Dappledpelt turned her head to stare back down at Swoopstrike, pain welling in her eyes. Frostpaw's heart twisted at the agony she saw in her face. Frostpaw leaned slightly against Dappledpelt's tortoiseshell side, trying to comfort her.

"I think he really loved you, you know," Frostpaw murmured. "He looked at you in a way different from how he looked at any other cat."

To Frostpaw's surprise, Dappledpelt responded with a strangled bark of laughter. But, the bitter laugh quickly faded to silence as Dappledpelt bit her lip, her gaze overflowing with grief as her ears flattened against her head.

"I know he did," she rasped hoarsely, bowing her head. "I just wish... things could've been different. That I hadn't..."

Dappledpelt gave her head a sharp shake, sighing forcefully as she closed her eyes.

"I wasted so much of our time together," she growled, her shoulders hunching.

"No! I'm sure that's not true," Frostpaw protested, gazing at Dappledpelt with wide eyes.

Frostpaw's heart twisted in dismay. She had been trying to help Dappledpelt, but now she felt like she had only made her pain worse. Dappledpelt's eyes flickered back open, and she gave Frostpaw a lingering sidelong glance.

"You wouldn't know. Things that happened before you were even born. That I never apologized to him for..." Dappledpelt said finally, her voice barely above a breath. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard, guilt flooding her expression for a moment. "I thought we'd have more time. That I'd make it up to him eventually."

Frostpaw shook her head stubbornly.

"I don't think they mattered to him," Frostpaw insisted. "Whatever you did or whatever happened, he's long forgiven it. You know

Swoopstrike. If he was still mad at you for anything, you'd have known it. Loud and clear."

Dappledpelt sighed again as her gaze flickered back to Swoopstrike.

"I hope you're right, Frostpaw," she murmured.

Dappledpelt glanced back over at her.

"And, for the record, he loved you too," Dappledpelt said, and a small playful gleam returned to her eyes. "You know, as much as Swoopstrike's capable of loving anyone."

Although Frostpaw's chest ached like it had been pierced through with a stake, she still purred softly as she gazed down at Swoopstrike's face. The rain had washed most of the blood and mud from his fur, and someone had shut his eyes. If she didn't look at the wound in his neck, she could almost imagine he was sleeping.

"I know," Frostpaw whispered, screwing her eyes shut.

Then Silence

Fallowtuft had emerged from the medicine cat's den not long after Frostpaw's conversation with Dappledpelt, and he had informed ShadowClan that he had managed to stop Autumnpaw's bleeding, binding his wounds with cobwebs, and that he was sleeping now.

"Do you think we'll be able to carry him back to the ShadowClan camp tonight?" Sedgestar asked.

Fallowtuft flicked his brown tail behind him indecisively.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "He seems strong enough to make it right now. But, it would be dire if the bleeding started again while you were carrying him, and there wasn't a medicine cat around to stop it. He can't afford to lose any more blood."

Morningstar stepped forward.

"Fallowtuft, would you be willing to join the ShadowClan patrol to help Autumnpaw until they make it back to their camp? None of our warrior's wounds are as severe, and I'm sure Pearnose would not mind patching us up while you're gone," Morningstar meowed.

"You are too generous, Morningstar," Sedgestar protested. "We could just as easily send a runner to ShadowClan to retrieve Clearstream or Elmclaw."

Morningstar shook his board head.

"Nonsense. No need for your medicine cats to run all the way here. ThunderClan is very grateful for all of ShadowClan's help. It's the least I could do," Morningstar insisted.

Fallowtuft nodded.

"That's fine with me. Let me go ask Pearnose," he said.

Sedgestar's jaw tensed, but he didn't protest again as the brown and

white medicine cat turned and padded over to the elders' den. A moment later, he reemerged with Pearnose padding stiffly out behind him. Pearnose dipped her head to Morningstar.

"I would be happy to step in while Fallowtuft is gone," she said to Morningstar before raising her voice to address all the cats in the camp. "Injured clan-mates, please line up by the fern tunnel. And, *StarClan help you*, if your cuts aren't licked clean by the time I get to you!"

Pearnose then turned, heading towards the medicine cat's den to retrieve herbs as the ThunderClan warriors meandered over to the fern tunnel. Fallowtuft turned to the ShadowClan cats.

"I'll need two warriors to carry Autumnpaw," he meowed.

Beeclaw and Poolpaw stepped forward.

"We can take him again," Poolpaw said.

Fallowtuft nodded.

"Good. Follow me. I'm going to grab some cobwebs for the trek," Fallowtuft said.

The three cats padded down the fern tunnel, and Weaseltail stepped towards Swoopstrike's body.

"I'll carry Swoopstrike," Weaseltail meowed quietly.

"I'll help you," Dappledpelt rasped, rising to her paws.

Frostpaw stepped away from Swoopstrike to give the two cats space to lift him, and a few moments later, Fallowtuft had come back out of the fern tunnel with cobwebs stuffed in his mouth, and Beeclaw and Poolpaw behind him with Autumnpaw. Frostpaw gazed at Autumnpaw. His belly was plastered with cobwebs, but at least she couldn't see the bright red gash or dripping blood any more. His eyes were shut, although his face tense, like he was having a bad dream.

Sedgestar nodded farewell to Morningstar before turning to his

patrol.

"Let's go home," Sedgestar murmured.

The journey back to the ShadowClan camp was blessedly uneventful. They had to cross the thunderpath instead of taking the tunnel because Fallowtuft was with them, but it was quiet; few monsters seemed to be out tonight. Fallowtuft had them stop a few times so he could inspect Autumnpaw's cobweb bandages, reenforcing them with more cobwebs when he felt it was necessary. But, thanks to Fallowtuft's diligence, Autumnpaw didn't start bleeding again.

When the thorn barrier of the camp was in sight, Sedgestar paused, turning to Fallowtuft but motioning for the patrol to continue ahead. In a rare sign of respect towards a non-ShadowClan cat, Sedgestar bowed his head to the ThunderClan medicine cat.

"Thank you Fallowtuft. Clearstream and Elmclaw will be able to take it from here. But, ShadowClan will not forget the debt we owe you," Sedgestar said.

Fallowtuft shook his head, his face kind.

"My medicine cat oath was to be a healer to all cats, not just ThunderClan ones," he said with a purr. "Although... once leaf-bare hits, I may need to ask Clearstream for some herbs. Catmint did not have a good green-leaf in our territory this year."

Sedgestar nodded.

"Speak to Clearstream, but I'm sure she would be happy to share. If there's anything more we can do for you, just let us know," Sedgestar said. "Goodbye Fallowtuft."

Fallowtuft turned aside, waving his tail in farewell.

"Goodbye," he meowed, walking back in the direction of the ThunderClan border.

Frostpaw ducked through the thorn tunnel as Sedgestar walked away from Fallowtuft and towards the camp. When Frostpaw

emerged in the camp, she saw Grovepelt rushing over to greet the returning cats, his brow furrowed in concern when he took in the dark looks on everyone's faces. A moment later, a heartbreaking wail from Snakeeyes echoed through the clearing when Swoopstrike's body was carried through the thorn barrier. The white-furred queen rushed over to him from where she had been sitting in front of the nursery as Weaseltail and Dappledpelt carried his body into the center of the camp.

"Swoopstrike, no!" she gasped in anguish, her ears flat against her head and her eyes wide with distress as she gazed at him. "How could this have happened?!"

Weaseltail and Dappledpelt gently lowered Swoopstrike's body down, and Frostpaw padded over to them, her paws dragging in the mud.

"Paledusk killed him," Frostpaw said to Snakeeyes, her voice a low growl.

Weaseltail's eyes widened, and he turned to look at her.

"The SkyClan deputy? Are you sure?" he asked.

Frostpaw nodded stonily, gazing down at Swoopstrike as rage rushed through her, causing her to unsheathe her claws and dig them into the muddy ground. Snakeeyes' fur brushed against her side.

"He will pay for it," Snakeeyes swore, her blue and green eyes blazing as she gazed down at her brother.

Frostpaw nodded in agreement, the fury and grief she felt inside too powerful to allow her to speak. Their clan-mates were all flooding the ShadowClan clearing now, drawn out by Snakeeyes' cry and the sounds of the returning cats. Shocked murmurs and gasps of grief rose up from cats as they caught sight of Swoopstrike's body. Swoopstrike's prickly attitude may have kept him from having multitudes of close friends among his clan-mates, but none of that mattered because he was still *ShadowClan.* And, everyone was stunned and saddened by the loss of the young, powerful warrior.

Beeclaw and Poolpaw came past, carrying Autumnpaw straight to where Clearstream and Elmclaw were waiting at the mouth of the medicine cat's den, and Frostpaw heard Redclaw gasp.

"My kit!" Redclaw cried, her voice shrill. "Autumnpaw!"

Redclaw rushed over to Autumnpaw's side, trying to lick his ears as Poolpaw and Beeclaw carried him into the fern framed den under Clanrock. Elmclaw gently blocked Redclaw with his body.

"Stay outside. We will take care of him," Elmclaw said, laying his tabby striped tail over her shoulders for a moment, before turning and disappearing into the den with Clearstream, as Beeclaw and Poolpaw came back out.

Poolpaw walked over to stand at his mother's side, and Pinepaw padded up to them, a silent presence at Redclaw's other shoulder. Redclaw tore her gaze off of the dark entrance to the medicine cat's cave to rasp her tongue over both of their faces.

"Thank StarClan you both are okay," Redclaw said, her voice wavering. "And, Weaseltail? Frostpaw?"

"They're fine," Poolpaw said, his voice reassuring, as he nodded towards Frostpaw and Weaseltail by Swoopstrike in the center of the camp.

At the sound of her name, Frostpaw slowly rose to her paws, turning her gaze away from Swoopstrike, and walking over to them. She could hear the sound of Weaseltail's footsteps behind her as he came over too. Grief and shock swirled in Frostpaw's belly, her face turned downwards as she padded up to Redclaw.

"Swoopstrike too... oh, Frostpaw," Redclaw murmured.

Redclaw closed the last bit of distance between them in a few steps, leaning her body against Frostpaw's and pressing her cheek to hers. Frostpaw stood stiffly for a moment, but as Redclaw's comforting scent wreathed around her, she began to shake, and it took all of her strength not to collapse to the ground next to her and bury her face into her familiar red and black pelt to hide from this horrible,

horrible reality. Redclaw gently rasped her tongue over Frostpaw's face as she had done to Poolpaw and Pinepaw.

"Shh... it's okay little one," Redclaw murmured soothingly.

Frostpaw nearly laughed. She wasn't happy, but something about her emotional fragility and Redclaw calling her "little one" when Frostpaw was bigger than her now, struck her as funny.

After a moment, Frostpaw gently pulled away from Redclaw, and Weaseltail stepped over to his mate in Frostpaw's place. His face was creased with grief, but he remained steady and supportive like a rock as Redclaw leaned heavily against his side, as she turned in an instant from a comforting figure for Frostpaw to a worried mother in need of comfort herself. Frostpaw turned to gaze back at the rest of the camp, but she kept her eyes from finding Swoopstrike's body, not wanting to feel that jolt of shock and horror over again at the sight of him dead.

Sedgestar had entered the camp, but he was still standing silently by the thorn tunnel, gazing out at his Clan with a clenched jaw. Everyone, besides Snakeeyes' and Dawntail's kits, was out in the clearing, either hunched over Swoopstrike's body, or standing a bit off to the side in small groups with shocked faces. Grovepelt padded up to Sedgestar, touching his tail-tip to their leader's flank gently.

"What happened? Did SkyClan win?" Grovepelt murmured.

Sedgestar shook his head, raising his chin to project his voice to the whole clan.

"ThunderClan and our patrol attacked SkyClan's camp as planned. SkyClan defended their camp viciously. We dealt a powerful blow to them, but Swoopstrike was killed, and Autumnpaw badly injured," Sedgestar meowed.

"For *ThunderClan's* sake," Marshnose snarled, rising to his paws to glare accusatively at Sedgestar.

Sedgestar narrowed his eyes at the brown and white tom, but didn't reprimand him for his insolent tone.

"We have fulfilled our promise to ThunderClan, but they still owe us a debt. One day they will repay us for this. I promise you, Marshnose," Sedgestar said. "But, for now, consider our alliance with ThunderClan over. ShadowClan stands alone once more."

"And, SkyClan?" Greytail rasped, the elder stiffly standing over Swoopstrike's body.

"I will decide what comes next for them," Sedgestar meowed, his gaze darkening.

"They killed my son," Greytail growled, curling her lip back to bare yellowed fangs.

Sedgestar bowed his head to her.

"I know, Greytail. I will not forget it, and ShadowClan will not forget him," he said.

After a moment of hesitation, Greytail nodded, looking a bit placated by his words. Sedgestar's gaze swept over all the cats in front of him.

"Tonight we will take care of our own, and grieve for the loss of a good warrior," Sedgestar said.

Sedgestar padded off with Grovepelt, and cats turned away from him to return to their activities.

Poolpaw and Pinepaw settled down by the base of Clanrock, under clumps of ferns only a few tail lengths away from the lichen covered mouth of the medicine cat's cave. Poolpaw motioned Frostpaw over with his tail.

"Want to wait here with us to hear about Autumnpaw?" Poolpaw asked as she padded up to them. "I mean..."

Poolpaw shot a quick guilty glance behind her, and Frostpaw knew he was looking at Swoopstrike's body.

"I totally understand if you want to go be with Swoopstrike instead —" he meowed.

Frostpaw was already shaking her head. Her stomach twisted at the thought of looking at Swoopstrike's stiffened, still form again after all of her memories of them together were of his fierce liveliness.

"I'll sit with you guys," Frostpaw rasped.

"Okay, of course," Poolpaw said with a gentle purr.

Frostpaw crouched down on the other side of Poolpaw, and all three of them pressed closely together like they had when they were little kits, asleep in a pile in the nursery next to Redclaw, Amberberry, and Mosspaw and Murmurpaw.

Frostpaw felt the grief in her heart soften a bit as she lost herself in the memories for a moment. The comforting press of Autumnpaw's and Poolpaw's long fur on either side of her. And, Pinepaw, even as much as she would hiss and growl and mock Frostpaw when she was awake, Frostpaw remembered she would still occasionally wake up to find the prickly black-furred kit cuddled up to her side, her face serene as she slept with her chin on Frostpaw's back.

But, right now of course, their group was three instead of four, and Frostpaw felt Autumnpaw's absence as if someone had chopped off one of her legs. Frostpaw screwed her eyes shut, the little bit of comfort she had found in her happy memories fading as pain, grief and worry came surging back. As much as losing Swoopstrike crippled her, she wasn't sure she would survive it if she lost Autumnpaw too.

Ever since she first stepped foot in ShadowClan, he had been a constant. Her first friend. Her biggest supporter and defender. How could she go on without seeing his bright amber eyes and friendly face every day? Laughing at all his dumb jokes? Being dragged into his silly pranks with Poolpaw? And, breaking up his endless arguments with Pinepaw?

Frostpaw sighed, opening her eyes again to stare forlornly out at the camp. Redclaw was pacing anxiously a little ways away from them, the fur down her back rippling with worry, while Beeclaw and Weaseltail stood shoulder to shoulder near her. The toms wore identical mournful and concerned expressions on their faces as they

also waited for news from the medicine cats.

Frostpaw carefully kept her gaze from wandering to where Swoopstrike's body lay in the center of camp. She lowered her gaze to stare down at her paws, pressing herself closer to Poolpaw's fluffy side and feeling a small amount of reassurance from the warmth his pelt provided. Poolpaw wrapped his tail around Frostpaw, and Pinepaw leaned her head against Poolpaw's shoulder, also seeking comfort in her brother's touch. Frostpaw sighed, closing her eyes for a moment and focusing on the grounding feeling of Poolpaw's warm side against hers. Her eyes flickered back open at the sound of paw-steps, and she saw Dewleaf padding up to the worried group, her brow furrowed with concern.

"Any news about Autumnpaw?" she asked in a hushed voice to Poolpaw.

Poolpaw shook his head.

"Nothing yet," he meowed.

Dewleaf gazed at the three apprentices with sympathetic eyes.

"Have any of you eaten? Do you want me to fetch you some fresh-kill?" she asked.

"I could eat something," Poolpaw said, glancing over at his sister. "Pinepaw?"

"Maybe something small. Like a mouse," Pinepaw said in a subdued voice.

Poolpaw glanced over at Frostpaw.

"Frostpaw?" he asked.

"I'm not hungry," Frostpaw mumbled, staring blankly down at the ground in front of her.

"I'll go grab two pieces of prey then," Dewleaf said. "And, let me know if any of you need anything else."

"Thanks Dewleaf," Poolpaw said, blinking gratefully at the grey she-cat.

"Of course," she said with a soft purr as she padded off towards the fresh-kill pile.

As Dewleaf padded away, a familiar, but unwelcome scent took her place. Frostpaw tensed up as she lifted her gaze from the ground to see Dampfang walking over to them. She clenched her jaw, feeling her blood already growing hot with anger.

Although Dampfang hadn't tried to bully Frostpaw too much in the past couple of moons, Frostpaw dearly hoped that he wouldn't be so frog-brained as to try to start something with her tonight. In this moment, she felt so raw and torn apart, if he so much as looked at her the wrong way, she wasn't sure if she'd be able to stop herself from doing something horribly rash... maybe even outright attacking him.

But, to Frostpaw's surprise, Dampfang's gaze was focused on Pinepaw. He didn't even spare a glance towards Frostpaw.

"Hey Pinepaw," he said in his deep voice.

Pinepaw shot him a look out of narrowed eyes, her face carefully guarded.

"I saw you fighting during the battle. You were brilliant," he meowed.

Pinepaw continued to stare at him with unresponsive silence.

"Like, I mean, the way you so easily unbalanced that ginger tom," Dampfang continued. "You'll have to show me some of those moves sometime. Your speed was unbelievable. I was..."

Frostpaw quickly stopped listening to Dampfang because as he continued on, Frostpaw noticed the guarded look on Pinepaw's face being washed away by a wave of rage, the long black fur down her back rising. Frostpaw's eyes widened in surprise at the intensity of the anger in her expression.

"Are you serious?!" Pinepaw burst out, ears pinned back to her head and fangs flashing.

Dampfang jolted at the interruption, blinked in shock and took one step back from the bristling she-cat. He gazed down at Pinepaw in bewilderment.

"Uh— what—what do you mean?" Dampfang stuttered.

Pinepaw curled her lip up in a furious sneer.

"You really think I don't see what you're doing here? Let me spell it out for you then. So, you've barely said two words to me in *moons* because you're always too busy with 'uh, warrior stuff,'" Pinepaw spat, putting on a mocking deep voice. "But, now that I'm getting my warrior name tonight, you've decided I'm important enough for you to talk to again. And, *out of all things*, you've decided that it's acceptable to chat about this *dumb battle*! While *my brother* is passed out in the medicine cat's den, so injured, he won't even be awake for the ceremony!"

"I just—" Dampfang began to protest, but Pinepaw exploded to her feet, cutting him off.

"What? You *just what?* Did you really think I wouldn't care? Or, that I wouldn't notice? Do you think *I'm stupid,* Dampfang?" she hissed in his face, her tail lashing.

Dampfang stood there in stunned silence, his jaw clenched.

"Get lost," Pinepaw spat derisively, taking a seat again and turning her head to the side, refusing to look at him.

Dampfang glared at her for a moment longer before his gaze flickered over to Poolpaw and Frostpaw. Poolpaw had been staring at Dampfang with wide eyes, but he looked away as soon as the dark tom glanced at him, clearly not wanting to get involved. But, when Dampfang looked over at Frostpaw, she didn't look away. Instead Frostpaw raised her chin, her blue eyes steadily meeting Dampfang's green ones.

With her gaze, she dared him to challenge her too.

Dampfang's eyes narrowed. He hissed in anger, whipped around and stalked away without another word.

Pinepaw settled back down in a crouch next to her brother, and Poolpaw slowly turned to look at her, his amber eyes still wide.

"I don't want to hear about it," Pinepaw growled.

"I didn't say anything," Poolpaw responded.

Dewleaf passed Dampfang as she padded back over to them with two mice in her mouth. She dropped the prey in front of Poolpaw and Pinepaw before turning to glance after her littermate, her brow furrowed. Poolpaw eagerly took a bite of his fresh-kill, while Pinepaw just rolled the mouse between her paws.

"Woah, what's got his tail in a twist?" Dewleaf asked, taking a seat in front of Poolpaw. "I haven't seen him this upset since I told him his torn ear made him look ugly."

Poolpaw made a choking sound as he laughed while trying to swallow a chunk of meat. Frostpaw gave his side a thump with her paw, and he managed to swallow the food, shooting Frostpaw a grateful look from the corner of his eye. Dewleaf watched Poolpaw with an amused gaze, her expression softening as if she was pleased that she had managed to make him laugh.

Dewleaf must really like Poolpaw if she can manage to look at him like that when he almost spit up half-chewed meat in front of her...

Frostpaw shook her head, feeling a pin-prick of amusement herself, despite the dark cloud that hung over her.

"We didn't insult his appearance," Poolpaw said between bites. "But, he and Pinepaw did get into a fight."

Dewleaf's ears pricked in interest, and she glanced at Pinepaw. But, Pinepaw continued to stare silently down at the mouse in front of her, not responding.

"Ah... Well Dampfang can definitely be a frog-brain sometimes. I'm sure he'll get over it," Dewleaf meowed. "Eventually, of course."

The lichen covering the medicine cat cave rustled. Elmclaw came padding out, brushing though the ferns with herbs and cobwebs in his mouth, and everyone tensed up at once.

"How is he?" Redclaw asked, desperately searching the dark tabby's face.

Elmclaw carefully lay the herbs at his paws.

"He's stable. Fallowtuft did a good job stopping the bleeding," Elmclaw said in a deep meow. "He's in and out of consciousness right now. When he's awake, he seems disorientated, but that's probably just from the blood loss. Clearstream is monitoring him now. We will keep turns watching him through the night."

"Will he be okay?" Redclaw demanded, sinking her claws into the ground.

"If he makes it until morning, he should be," Elmclaw murmured. "As long as infection doesn't set in afterwards, of course."

Frostpaw felt a heavy weight fall into her stomach at the grim words. Poolpaw's jaw was clenched, and Pinepaw was gripping the ground underneath with her claws so hard, it looked like she was trying to keep herself from flying off of it. Weaseltail padded over to Redclaw, leaning a supportive side against his mate. Redclaw closed her eyes, taking a trembling breath.

"Autumnpaw's a fighter," Beeclaw said, setting his jaw determinedly. "He'll make it."

Redclaw nodded vigorously, her eyes opening. Her green gaze burnt like fire.

"Of course he will," she said forcefully, turning back to Elmclaw. "Can I see him?"

Elmclaw nodded, glancing around at the crowd of cats around him.

"Just one at a time though," he meowed. "I don't want to crowd Clearstream."

Redclaw nodded and padded into the den. Sedgestar strode across camp to walk up to Elmclaw.

"Autumnpaw?" was all he said.

"We're doing all we can for him," Elmclaw said. "Clearstream's with him, but I need to treat the other warriors now."

Sedgestar nodded, and Elmclaw picked the herbs and cobwebs back up, heading off to make the rounds to any injured cat.

Sedgestar glanced over at Poolpaw, Pinepaw and Frostpaw.

"We will proceed with the warriors ceremony tonight," Sedgestar said in a quiet voice. "Autumnpaw will still get his name as well."

Sedgestar inclined his head to the side.

"Frostpaw, a quick word," Sedgestar said.

Frostpaw slowly pulled herself to her feet, following Sedgestar out of earshot of the group. Her paws dragged against the ground as she padded after him. After Elmclaw's grim warning about *if* Autumnpaw made it through the night, she felt completely drained. She didn't even have the energy left to wonder what her leader wanted to talk about. Sedgestar brought her to a more isolated corner of the camp, before turning around, and staring back into the camp's center. Frostpaw stood next to him, and she could tell from the direction of his eyes that he was gazing at Swoopstrike's body. Frostpaw still couldn't make herself look at her mentor, so she stared quietly down at her paws instead. Frostpaw jolted slightly when she felt a soft brush against her fur. She lifted her eyes to see that Sedgestar had gently touched his tail-tip to her shoulder.

"I'm sorry about Swoopstrike. I know you two were close," Sedgestar said softly, his amber gaze flicking from Swoopstrike's body to Frostpaw.

Frostpaw felt her throat close up in grief. She bowed her head again.

"He was a good mentor," she whispered to the ground.

Sedgestar nodded, and Frostpaw glanced back up at him.

"And, a good warrior," Sedgestar added. "Taken much too soon."

Sedgestar sighed, and for a moment, the smooth and collected expression he always wore as leader dropped, and Frostpaw could see deep sadness in his face as he grieved for the potential life stolen from a young warrior.

"I thought one day I might even name him my deputy," Sedgestar murmured.

Frostpaw must have looked surprised because Sedgestar continued quickly.

"Not for a while, no. Not for a long while. I'm in no rush to replace Grovepelt," Sedgestar meowed. "And, Swoopstrike would not've been ready for a while either."

Sedgestar gave his head a small, sad shake.

"Such a talented warrior. But, by StarClan, did that cat have short temper and a sharp tongue. He's always been too quick to jump to conflict and aggression, be it physical or verbal."

Sedgestar sighed again, looking back over at Swoopstrike.

"I'd hoped with enough time, I'd be able to temper him. Make him a bit more level-headed. A bit more compassionate."

Warmth flickered in Sedgestar's amber eyes when they shifted back to Frostpaw.

"I think by training you, you helped teach him that," Sedgestar murmured.

Frostpaw bowed her head, not knowing what to say. Sedgestar let out a low, sad purr.

"Forgive me. If Emberflower was here, she'd say I'm rambling on like an elder. Dwelling on 'what if's'," Sedgestar said, looking away from Frostpaw. "...That's no way to lead."

There was a heartbeat of silence before Sedgestar continued.

"There is another thing I wanted to talk to you about. Dampfang spoke to me a little while ago. Something about you protecting a SkyClan elder," Sedgestar said.

Frostpaw's eyes widened. In her grief, she had almost forgotten about that confrontation with Dampfang. Frostpaw opened her jaws to defend herself, but Sedgestar raised his tail to halt her.

"It's okay, Frostpaw. You're not in trouble," Sedgestar said. "I already had ordered that no elders were to be harmed, and you are a compassionate cat. When you saw a weak elder in need, I'm sure you were just doing what you thought was right by getting her out of the fighting. And, I also saw you fiercely fighting SkyClan warriors for us during the battle. I don't doubt your loyalty to ShadowClan."

"I'm glad," Frostpaw murmured. "Thank you Sedgestar."

Sedgestar nodded, and rose to his paws to leave.

"I will hold your warrior ceremonies soon," he said over his shoulder as he began to turn away.

Those words sparked a thought in Frostpaw's mind.

"Wait— uh, Sedgestar?" Frostpaw meowed hesitantly. "Can I ask you something?"

"You already did," he said, but when Sedgestar turned to look at her, his eyes were kind. "Yes, what is it?"

"It's about my warrior's ceremony, actually," Frostpaw murmured, looking down at her paws. "About my warrior name. I was wondering if I could make a request."

Sedgestar tilted his head at her.

"Traditionally leaders pick out the names, in conference with the warrior's friends and families if the leader wishes. But, the warriors themselves don't normally request one," Sedgestar said, his voice

soft but firm.

"I know," Frostpaw insisted, lifting her eyes from her paws to look at him. "But, I've been thinking about something Snakeeyes told me a long time ago, when I was just a kit. She saw me being teased for being a rogue and for looking strange. She told me that no matter how much I tried to fit in, I'd always be seen as different, an outsider. But, if I could make my difference my strength, no one could hurt me with it anymore. She told me when she was young, she was sometimes bullied too because of her eyes. But, she asked you to name her Snakeeyes because it let her claim her difference. I was wondering if you'd let me do the same... It would mean a lot to me."

Sedgestar was gazing at Frostpaw kindly. There was maybe even a hint of pride in his eyes.

"So, what do you suggest?" Sedgestar asked.

"Frostmask," she said, raising her chin as she steadily met his gaze.

Sedgestar started nodded slowly.

"When Snakeeyes asked me about her name, I remember thinking, that I was proud to be the leader of such a fearless warrior," Sedgestar said, giving a soft purr. "I find myself now thinking the same about you."

Frostpaw raised her tail, her eyes brightening a bit. Despite the grief that weighed her down, she couldn't help the rush of warm pride in her chest.

"Very well, Frostmask," Sedgestar said, with a nod of his head to her. "I think Swoopstrike would be proud too."

Frostpaw felt a shiver run up her spine. Sedgestar touched his tail to her shoulder again.

"One more thing," he said in a gentle voice. "Once the sky has cleared enough for us to see Silverpelt, we will hold Swoopstrike's death ceremony. If you have any goodbyes left to say to him, you should do them soon."

Frostpaw blinked, a bit confused by his words, but she nodded. Sedgestar turned and padded off. Frostpaw waited at the edge of the camp for a moment longer. Elmclaw was heading her way with herbs in his jaws, flicking his tail to call Frostpaw to him. Frostpaw padded over to the medicine cat.

"Sit," Elmclaw rumbled around the herbs in his jaws.

Frostpaw obeyed, and Elmclaw placed the herbs on the ground in front of them with a great amount of delicacy and care for such a large cat. Elmclaw then turned to Frostpaw, carefully nudging her all over with his muzzle to find all of her wounds. Frostpaw gazed down at her chest and paws, feeling a flash of embarrassment as she realized she was still splattered with mud and blood from the battle, her cuts hidden under a layer of filth.

"Lick your cuts clean," Elmclaw ordered, his deep voice firm but still gentle.

While Frostpaw cleaned her wounds, Elmclaw chewed some of the herbs he brought over into a poultice, and once she had finished, he slathered them on her cuts.

"How are you feeling?" Elmclaw asked, peering at her with serious green eyes when he was done.

"I mean, the cuts sting a little from the herbs. But, none of them are that bad..." Frostpaw began, but her voice trailed off as Elmclaw shook his head.

"I mean, emotionally," Elmclaw said, his face empathetic. "Swoopstrike's death. Autumnpaw's injuries. Do you need something to soothe you? Help you sleep tonight?"

"Oh. Uh... I'm okay..." Frostpaw muttered, her gaze flashing down at her paws.

"Alright," Elmclaw said softly. "Come find me if you need anything. Or, just need to talk. But, especially if any cuts get inflamed or start oozing in the next couple of days."

Frostpaw's gaze flickered back up to his, and she dipped her head to

him.

"Thank you Elmclaw," she said, sincerely meaning the words.

Elmclaw nodded, silently picking up the herbs he had left and heading over to the next wounded cat. Frostpaw watched him go. She had always wondered the reason why such a large and powerful cat had chosen to be a healer instead of a warrior. But, after seeing the empathy on his face just now, she was finally starting to see why.

Frostpaw sighed quietly to herself as Sedgestar's strange last words began to echo in her ears again. Swoopstrike was already dead, so why did Sedgestar tell her to say her goodbyes to him now, before his death ceremony. Why did this death ceremony matter? Shouldn't he be in StarClan by now? All Clan cats went there when they died, right?

Frostpaw shook her ears.

The idea of StarClan always made her a bit uncomfortable. She believed that the leaders and medicine cats could speak to them from time to time; it had to be true, Sedgestar, Clearstream and Elmclaw wouldn't lie to them like that. Their prophecies were also held in high regard by cats of all the Clans, but, to Frostpaw, the whole concept of StarClan seemed so *unfair*. Why did the clan cats get to go somewhere when they died, but not rogues or kitty-pets? What made them so special? Did May get to go to StarClan?

Frostpaw felt a rush of cold inside her. Would she go to StarClan? Or, would they not accept her for her rogue blood?

Frostpaw gave her head a brisk shake like she could shake out the dark thoughts. She was a loyal ShadowClan apprentice, about to be a ShadowClan warrior! If that wasn't good enough for StarClan, then maybe she didn't want to spend her afterlife there anyway.

Frostpaw swallowed. But, that would mean she'd never get to see Swoopstrike again...

Frostpaw finally made her eyes look over at his body. Slowly, she

padded over to him, walking to a free spot by his side. Around her, some cats crouched silently near him, others were gently grooming his fur, and some, like Dappledpelt, were even murmuring under their breath, as if they were talking to him. Frostpaw crouched down next to Swoopstrike, gazing down at his black and silver pelt, feeling the empty hole of grief ache in her chest.

I guess... I should say my goodbyes then. Like Sedgestar said.

Frostpaw cleared her throat lightly, tilting her muzzle down to his pelt. He didn't smell like death at least. The grooming as well as the fragrant herbs the medicine cats had laid around him masked any scent of blood or decomposition.

"Uh— hey Swoopstrike," Frostpaw began, her voice a whisper. "I just wanted to say thank you for being my mentor. You did a great job at it, and I really learned a lot..."

Frostpaw's voice trailed off as her pelt warmed with embarrassment. She felt very foolish, and it felt all wrong! Firstly, she was talking to a corpse. How could he even hear what she was saying. And, secondly, and maybe even more importantly, she would *never* talk like this to Swoopstrike, or say things like this to him when he was alive.

Frostpaw was certain that one thing that Swoopstrike absolutely didn't care about was gratitude. He never cared what other cats thought of him... how could he, with an attitude as prickly as his? When he did good things, it wasn't because he wanted thanks or praise. It was simply because he was a cat with a good heart.

Frostpaw sighed softly, closing her eyes, and an image of Swoopstrike, alive and well, formed in her mind. She saw him looking at her with a furrowed brow and his muzzle wrinkled up as if he was disgusted by her icky attempt at gratitude and a goodbye.

Frostpaw purred quietly to herself.

"Sorry. I'm not good at this," she murmured.

Swoopstrike's face smoothed, his whiskers twitching as a hint of

amusement appeared in his green eyes.

At the sight of that familiar look, Frostpaw's heart twisted in pain.

"I'll miss you," she whispered.

Swoopstrike blinked at her, his expression softening. He didn't speak, but Frostpaw could see in his eyes that he would miss her too.

Frostpaw's eyes flickered back open, the image of Swoopstrike in her mind evaporating like fog on a sunny day. She shivered slightly, gazing back down at his body.

...Had she actually spoken to his spirit, or was it just her imagination providing her with the picture of him that she wished she would see?

Frostpaw shook her pelt like she was shaking off cold water. There was no way to tell either way. But, regardless, her heart did feel a bit more at peace.

Frostpaw rose to her paws. She spotted Redclaw a little ways away, apparently having emerged from the medicine cat's den. Frostpaw padded over to her.

"How's Autumnpaw?" she meowed.

"He was sleeping when I was in there," Redclaw said. "But, he's looking okay. Weaseltail is seeing him now"

Frostpaw nodded, trying to reassure herself with Redclaw's words.

Autumnpaw will be alright.

Frostpaw's ears perked as quiet muttering suddenly filled the camp.

"The clouds have parted. I can see the stars."

"StarClan's blessed us. Swoopstrike will be able to journey tonight."

"Safe passage, Swoopstrike."

"The light of Silverpelt guides you."

Frostpaw turned as the three elders of the Clan walked purposefully over to stand together by Swoopstrike's head. The quiet murmuring that had filled the camp silenced as every cat turned to look at them. Mourners that had crouched next to Swoopstrike's body rose to their feet, respectfully taking a step back so that the elders were the closest cats to him.

"What's going on?" Frostpaw murmured to Redclaw.

Redclaw swiped her tail comfortingly down Frostpaw's side.

"It's Swoopstrike's death ceremony," Redclaw whispered. "It is the elders' duty to preform a death ceremony on the first night we can see the stars after someone dies."

Frostpaw cocked her head in confusion.

"Why do the stars matter?" she asked.

"The ceremony sends a cat's spirit to StarClan," Redclaw explained gently. "Without the stars visible above us, they may get lost on their way. You, Poolpaw, Pinepaw and Autumnpaw have been blessed that you've haven't had to witness a death ceremony yet."

Frostpaw's brow furrowed.

"...Except for May's death," Frostpaw mumbled, stepping away from Redclaw's touch.

Redclaw's green eyes widened.

"Of course. I'm sorry Frostpaw. I had been thinking about ShadowClan cats. I didn't mean to exclude your mother..." Redclaw murmured.

Frostpaw's ears flattened. But, she couldn't really be mad at Redclaw. May hadn't been a ShadowClan cat, after all. She had only been in the ShadowClan nursery for a few days before she died.

What *had* been done to May after she died? The last time Frostpaw

had seen her body was when she was taken out of the nursery. Had she been given a death ceremony? Probably not, given the way Redclaw had said it.

...So that answered her earlier question then. May wasn't in StarClan. She hadn't had the proper ceremony for it. Where was her spirit then? Lost somewhere? Here on Earth still? Or, just... gone?

Frostpaw was pulled out of her grim thoughts as Greytail took a step towards Swoopstrike, her gaze heavy with sadness.

"Swoopstrike," she said in a voice that was quiet, but clear, carrying all throughout the camp. "You've died a warrior's death, fulfilling your duties to the clan by giving your life for your friends and family. For this, we will be forever in your debt..."

Treefur stepped forward to her side, his cloudy grey eyes looking down at Swoopstrike.

"We release you from your vows to ShadowClan," he rasped. "Although no recompense can make up for the life you've lost, the evergreen hunting grounds of our ancestors await you."

Now Flymask padded forward to join them. He tilted his head back, his eyes searching the small slivers of stars that peeked out between the clouds.

"Journey to them now with claws sharp, eyes bright, and tail held high! Go, and receive your warrior's welcome!" Flymask yowled.

Frostpaw noticed that everyone in the camp was slowly rising to their paws.

The elders all threw their heads back, beginning the chat.

"Swoopstrike! Swoopstrike!" they yowled, shouting his name like they would for a newly named warrior.

"Swoopstrike! Swoopstrike! Swoopstrike!"

The clan joined in, stomping their paws to the beat, and instead of gazing down at his body, cats threw their chins up so their gazes

could search the sky.

"Swoopstrike. Swoopstrike." Frostpaw murmured along with them.

She couldn't help but lift her eyes to the stars too. She almost desperately searched the tiny pin-pricks of light that she could see between the clouds, glimmering in the darkness. But, they all looked the same to her as the night before. She could not spot a new star to show that Swoopstrike had made it there.

The chanting and stomping quieted down, and now Elmclaw stepped forward.

"Swoopstrike runs with StarClan now," Elmclaw said in his deep, rumbling voice. "The body he left behind will be buried at dawn."

Cats murmured to each other, some now turning to their dens to sleep. A few, like Dappledpelt, Snakeeyes and Greytail returned to crouch back down near Swoopstrike's body. Frostpaw's ears pricked as she heard Sedgestar bounding up the Clanrock.

"Before we return to our dens for the night, please come gather beneath Clanrock for a clan-meeting," Sedgestar meowed.

Cats stopped in their progress towards the dens, turning away and padding back over into the center of camp.

"I know today has brought tragedy," Sedgestar began, his tail swishing slowly behind him as cats settled down again in the camp. "Swoopstrike will be sorely missed by all of ShadowClan. But, you all know as well as I that we must continue to move forward. The wind, the rain and the seasons have no care for our grief. And, our prey and our enemies will not lie down at our feet simply because we are sad."

Sedgestar bowed his head for a moment.

"In times like these, we need our warriors more than ever. You are the life-blood of the clan. And, I am proud to announce four more additions to our ranks tonight," Sedgestar meowed. "Pinepaw, Poolpaw, and Frostpaw, please come to the base of Clanrock."

Frostpaw swallowed. It was finally time for her ceremony. Frostpaw slowly walked over to stand at the base of Clanrock. Poolpaw and Pinepaw joined her only a moment later.

Sedgestar tilted his head back to search the stars again.

"I call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on each of these apprentices. They've trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn," Sedgestar meowed.

His gaze now flickered back down to the three apprentices in front of him.

"Pinepaw, Poolpaw, Frostpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend ShadowClan, even at the cost of your life?" he asked solemnly.

His words weighed heavily on Frostpaw's shoulders, especially after she had just seen Swoopstrike pay that price.

"I do," Frostpaw said, echoing Poolpaw's and Pinepaw's confirmations.

Sedgestar nodded somberly, accepting their vows.

"Ancestors, I ask you too to look down on Autumnpaw. He has learned the warrior code and has been wounded in the service of his Clan. Let him receive his warrior name alongside his den-mates, so if he is received by StarClan tonight, he will be welcomed as a warrior," Sedgestar meowed.

Frostpaw's heart twisted at the mention of Autumnpaw's injuries, but she didn't have much time to dwell on it when Sedgestar bounded down from the Clanrock, approaching Pinepaw first.

"By the powers of StarClan, give you your warrior names. Pinepaw, from this moment you will be known as Pineshade. StarClan honors your determination and your independence," Sedgestar said, touching his muzzle to her forehead.

Pineshade licked his shoulder respectfully in response, and stepped

back, her eyes shining with pride. Sedgestar turned to Poolpaw.

"Poolpaw, from this moment you will be known as Poolcloud. StarClan honors your enthusiasm and your kindness," Sedgestar meowed.

He touched his nose to Poolcloud's head, and Poolcloud too licked his shoulder. As Poolcloud stepped back, he squared his shoulders, holding his chin high. Sedgestar finally reached Frostpaw. Frostpaw dipped her head to him, waiting for him to give her her new name.

"Frostpaw, from this moment you will be known as Frostmask. StarClan honors your loyalty and your thoughtfulness," Sedgestar meowed.

Frostmask felt his muzzle brush her head, and she leaned forward, quickly rasping her tongue on his shoulder before stepping back. Frostmask raised her tail, setting her jaw and staring forward confidently. She imagined her new name resting on her, enveloping her like the hard armor that insects wore, and protecting her.

Sedgestar paused for a heartbeat before continuing.

"Autumnpaw will now be known as Autumnleap. StarClan honors his energy and his strength," Sedgestar said.

He then turned to dip his head to the newly named warriors in front of him.

"We welcome you all as full warriors of ShadowClan," Sedgestar meowed.

"Pineshade! Poolcloud! Frostmask! Autumnleap!"

The clan chanted for all of them. Frostmask raised her chin in pride, turning to sweep her gaze across her clan-mates, before her eyes rested on Swoopstrike's body. Her gaze flickered up to the stars.

Can you see me Swoopstrike?

"Congratulations, all of you," Redclaw said, purring despite her worry for Autumnleap.

Weaseltail had emerged from the medicine cat's den at Sedgestar's summoning before the ceremony, and he and Redclaw were the first cats to pad up to the newly named warriors. Redclaw twined herself around each of them, and Frostmask purred as she rubbed her face against Redclaw's. Weaseltail purred loudly for them as well, laying his long tail over Frostmask's back before turning to also congratulate Pineshade and Poolcloud similarly. Grovepelt and Fogfur approached as well, murmuring warm congratulations to their former apprentices, but sparing friendly words and nods to Frostmask too. After them came Dewleaf and Murmurpaw and Mosspaw, followed by their mothers, Larkfoot and Amberberry. Then Snakeeyes trotted up to Frostmask, affectionately brushing her cheek fur against hers and purring despite the grief that still marred her expression. Even Dappledpelt, though she remained crouched next to Swoopstrike's body, met her gaze to Frostmask's and gave a proud nod.

Frostmask blinked in surprise and gratitude as she received her clan-mates congratulations and felt the friendly brushes of their pelts against hers. She'd lost someone very dear to her tonight, but there were still so many cats here that cared about her, more cats than she would've even guessed.

When did I gain so many friends?

Once all the congratulations had been given, Poolcloud took a step towards Clanrock, inclining his head in the direction of the medicine cat's den.

"Come on Pineshade and Frostmask," Poolcloud said, giving a soft purr as he tried out their new names. "Let's go see Autumnleap before we have to start our vigil."

"Good idea," Frostmask meowed.

Pineshade nodded in agreement, and they followed Poolcloud over to the lichen covered cave. Poolcloud went in first, calling a greeting to Clearstream while Pineshade and Frostmask waited for their turn outside.

Pineshade padded a little ways away to sharpen her claws on the

Oak Tree as they waited, but Frostmask didn't follow her, her gaze instead being drawn to a flicker of movement in the deep shadows of the Clanrock. Dampfang's inky black form padded out, his green gaze burning with anger as he approached Frostmask. Frostmask immediately tensed up, the fragile, peaceful feeling that she'd gained from the presence of her friends shattering as she dug her claws into the muddy ground.

"What do you want?" Frostmask said, growling a warning. "I'm not in a great mood, and Pineshade still isn't either. If she sees you again, she might claw you up with more than just her words this time."

Dampfang's lip curled up furiously.

"Very funny, rogue. But actually, I came here to talk to you. To tell you that you may have Sedgestar and everyone else fooled, but I know who you *really* are," Dampfang hissed in a low voice.

Frostmask's eyes narrowed, and her tail started twitching.

"And, what is that, Dampfang?" she growled, allowing some of her fangs to flash threateningly.

Dampfang dug unsheathed claws into the muddy ground.

"You're the rotten pine," Dampfang said with a snarl.

"For obeying Sedgestar's orders to not hurt an elder? Don't be ridiculous," Frostmask scoffed.

Dampfang narrowed his harsh green eyes, his tail sweeping slowly behind him.

"It's not just that," he growled.

"Then what?" Frostmask shot back. "Because your accusations are baseless. In fact, I know what's really going on here... You're just angry about Pineshade rejecting you. And, you're displacing that anger onto me."

Dampfang spat furiously for a moment before he seemed to

compose himself. He stretched himself up to his full intimidating height, looking down his muzzle at Frostmask with his face wrinkled up in disgust, ignoring her last comment.

"You don't *belong* here. And, you will be ShadowClan's downfall, I can sense it. But, I'll stop you," Dampfang rumbled in a low voice.

Frostmask derisively curled up her lip, about to laugh at the absurdity of his threat, but Dampfang was already padding past her, heading off.

"Watch your back, Frostmask," Dampfang hissed over his shoulder.

End of Book 1

Friends? (Book 2 and Allegiances)

Book Two: Fragments of Ice

Frostmask's ears twitched at the sounds of muttering in the den. She flattened them against her head, trying to block out the noises of the voices and drift back into sleep. But, the quiet buzzing in her ears still nagged at her, keeping her awake. Frostmask sighed, her eyes flickering open. She still wasn't used to sleeping in the noisy warriors den. There were so many cats under the large bramble bush that any time of night or day, there was bound to be someone whispering.

Frostmask raised her head from the mossy nest, yawning. Judging by the number of cats still sleeping and from how little light she could make out from den's entrance, it appeared to be before dawn.

Frostmask shook her ears irritably. She had held her vigil the previous night, then stayed up most of the day afterwards hunting. She had only finally made it to her nest early last evening, but she still wasn't caught up on sleep. And, she was *certainly not* in the mood to be awoken before dawn by some noisy clan-mates. Frostmask glared at the culprits— Hootflight and Leafbreeze to be exact. But, they were too absorbed in their own conversation to notice the irritation Frostmask was attempting to radiate in their direction.

It was a futile task anyway, since it seemed like Frostmask was the only cat bothered by it. Even Pineshade and Poolcloud were still sleeping soundly in their nests next to hers. Frostmask sighed again, lowering her chin to rest on her paws and shutting her eyes, but fickle sleep had been scared off like a flighty rabbit.

Frostmask's eyes flickered back open again, her gaze drifting to an

empty nest beside hers. It was the nest she, Pineshade, and Poolcloud had made for Autumnleap, when he was able to leave the medicine cats' den and sleep in the warriors' den.

Frostmask felt a surge of relief, not for the first time, that he had made it through the night after the battle. He had spent most of yesterday sleeping, recovering from the blood loss Clearstream said, so she had yet to have an actual conversation with him. But, just knowing that he was alive was enough.

Frostmask rose from her nest. If she couldn't sleep, the next best thing would be to go see Autumnleap before she had to start her duties for the day. Maybe he would even be able to talk to her now.

Frostmask padded out of the warriors den and walked over to the fresh-kill pile. It was still dark out, and no day-time patrols had begun, but the pile still had very choice pieces brought in from cats that had chosen to go out on night-hunts. She picked a plump vole for Autumnleap from the pile, and she carried to over to the medicine cat's den. At the den's entrance, she stuck her head through the lichen covering, meowing a quiet greeting. Clearstream was in her nest near the entrance of the dark, cozy cave, but she raised her head at Frostmask's arrival.

"Hello Frostmask. Come to see Autumnleap?" Clearstream said in a quiet voice as Frostmask padded inside.

Frostmask nodded. Autumnleap was lying in a nest at the back of the cave, away from Clearstream, but Elmclaw was nowhere to be seen in the den. Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"Where's Elmclaw?" Frostmask asked curiously.

Clearstream purred, amused by Frostmask's confusion at Elmclaw's absence.

"He went out for a hunt and to gather herbs a little while ago," Clearstream said. "We may be medicine cats, but we're still ShadowClan cats. And, the urge to be out in the darkness is just as strong for us as it is for you warriors."

Frostmask blinked, feeling a tad embarrassed that she hadn't guessed that.

"Oh, that makes sense. I didn't realize you or he did much hunting," Frostmask said.

Clearstream chuckled lightly.

"Well I don't," she meowed. "Not unless I get hungry while gathering herbs that is. But, Elmclaw was a warrior before he trained to be a medicine cat, and I think he misses the thrill of hunting quarry that moves. Plants can be a bit boring that way."

Frostmask purred, and Clearstream flicked her ears.

"Well enough about that. I know you didn't come here to chat with me," Clearstream said lightly. "You can go check on Autumnleap and leave him that vole. But, please don't wake him if he's sleeping."

Frostmask nodded.

"I won't. Thanks Clearstream," she said.

She turned and padded deeper into the den, walking over to Autumnleap's dark form in the back of the cave. Frostmask lowered the vole to place it beside his nest. His eyes were shut, and he appeared to be sleeping.

Even though that meant that Frostmask couldn't talk to him, she still felt her heart soften as she watched his flanks rise and fall as he breathed steadily. She lowered her head to lightly touch her muzzle to his forehead for a moment.

"I'm glad you're okay," she whispered as she lifted her head back up.

She turned to leave.

"...Frostpaw?" Autumnleap rasped, his eyes flicking open.

Frostmask's ears pricked, and she glanced down at him, purring quietly at the sight of her friend's amber eyes. He was gazing up at

her, although he seemed too tired to lift his head from his nest.

"It's Frostmask now, remember?" she said gently, sitting down next to him.

"Right, of course," he murmured, blinking. "Clearstream told me about the ceremony at some point yesterday... it sort of felt like a dream though."

"Well you've been through a lot," she murmured.

Frostmask ran her gaze down his body, trying to see how Autumnleap was doing. His wound was still covered in cobwebs and herbs, and he winced as he slowly lifted his chin up off of the nest.

"I brought you a vole if you're hungry," Frostmask said, pushing it closer to him with a paw. "How are you doing?"

Autumnleap sniffed the food, taking a small bite, which he chewed slowly.

"I'm doing okay. Or, as best that can be expected really," he said, glancing down at the long bandage on his belly.

Frostmask nodded sympathetically.

"At least you woke up as a warrior, right? That's a silver-lining I guess," Frostmask said.

"Yeah, 'Autumnleap,'" he meowed, tilting his head at her. "I'm still not used to either of our new names."

"Well, I think it suits you," Frostmask said.

Autumnleap purred lightly.

"Maybe, but I'm definitely not in the mood to leap around right now," he joked.

Frostmask purred back in response.

"Maybe it's an aspirational name," she meowed playfully.

Autumnleap widened his eyes in mock offense.

"I just think it's a bit cruel of Sedgestar to give me a name about something that I can't even do right now. I mean, really, if I had been blinded, would he have named me Autumnsight?" Autumnleap asked.

Frostmask purred louder, her heart warming with pleasure to see him acting like his old self. She lightly flicked his shoulder with her tail, being careful not to hurt him.

"I think you're being dramatic. You'll be back to leaping around in no time," Frostmask said.

"Well, what about you?" Autumnleap asked. "What do you think of your name?"

"I like it," Frostmask said.

She shuffled her paws, suddenly feeling a bit shy.

"I, uh, asked Sedgestar for it actually," she murmured.

Autumnleap blinked gently up at her for a moment.

"It's cute," Autumnleap said, and his gaze became playful again. "Although... you don't think that it seems a little bit *on the nose?"*

Autumnleap reached a paw out in an attempt to bat her muzzle, but he was slowed down by his injury. Frostmask ducked his paw easily, groaning loudly in exasperation.

"Do you get it?" Autumnleap said, his gaze twinkling. "Because 'mask,' and your muzzle is grey—"

"Yes of course I get it!" Frostmask huffed, rolling her eyes, but still, she couldn't stop a purr from rising in her throat.

Autumnleap purred, his eyes shining as he gazed up at her, and his expression one that she somehow found both obnoxious and

endearing at the same time. She playfully swatted at his ear with her paw.

"Really? You've been awake for like what, ten heartbeats? And, you're already making bad puns?" Frostmask said through a purr.

Autumnleap widened her eyes at her.

"Well I've been asleep for a whole day! That's a lot of lost time to make up," he said, purring.

"At least you'll have plenty of time to think up all those bad jokes while you're recuperating," Frostmask said, her tail flicking playfully.

"I'll be sure to save them all up for you and share them every time you visit me between warrior's duties," Autumnleap said with a smug purr.

Autumnleap swept his tail across the part of the moss nest next to him.

"Speaking of warrior's duties though... do you have somewhere to be soon, or do you want to hang out with me longer? I'd love some company while I eat this vole," he said.

Frostmask glanced back outside of the cave. She could see the sky was getting a bit brighter.

"Grovepelt will be assigning patrols soon. But, I don't think he expects me there bright and early since I spent all yesterday hunting after the vigil," Frostmask said. "So, sure. I'll hang out for a while."

Autumnleap purred happily as she took his wordless invitation and stepped into the nest beside him. Once Frostmask had settled into the soft moss, Autumnleap gently touched his tail to her side, and their gazes met.

"You asked me how I was doing, but I didn't get a chance to ask you," he meowed. "How are you doing? And, Pineshade? Poolcloud?"

"They're doing fine," Frostmask said. "They even helped me make a nest in the warriors' den for you, once you're ready to sleep there. It's right next to ours. Although Poolcloud and Dewleaf keep making doe-eyes at each other from across the camp, so I wouldn't be surprised if he moves his nest next to hers soon. I think maybe the battle was the push they needed to realize how short and precious life can be or something? I bet they'll officially get together soon. Oh! Speaking of 'romance' though, you should've seen the lashing Pineshade gave Dampfang after the battle. He was being callous and obnoxious, and she completely decimated him. You would've loved it."

"And, you?" he interrupted softly, pulling her out of speculation about her den-mates.

His amber eyes were serious as they searched hers.

"...I know about Swoopstrike," he murmured.

Frostmask's ears went flat against her head as she sighed heavily. She had managed to keep her mind from wandering to her mentor so far this morning. But, it made sense that Autumnleap wanted to talk about him. He hadn't even been there for the death ceremony, or had gotten to speak to Frostmask after the battle at all.

"I'm sorry, we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Autumnleap murmured, glancing away from her. "I just wanted to make sure that you're okay."

"No, no. It's okay," Frostmask murmured, looking down at her paws. "We can talk about him. It just... hurts."

"Of course," Autumnleap said, reassuringly brushing his dark ginger tail down her side again.

She shot him a grateful look. He returned the glance, but then his gaze darkened, and he gave a sad sigh, his eyes becoming downcast.

"He saved my life, you know," he muttered. "If Swoopstrike hadn't shown up when he did... Paledusk would've killed me, I'm sure of it."

A black haze of fury and grief filled Frostmask's mind, and she dug her claws into the ground, imagining instead of moss, she was sinking them into Paledusk's white pelt.

"Paledusk will pay for his death," Frostmask whispered, the words hissing out between her clenched fangs. "And, for what he did to you."

"I just..." Autumnleap began.

Autumnleap sighed, screwing his eyes shut for a moment. At his expression of anguish, Frostmask was pulled from the dark haze of anger in her mind. She peered at his troubled face in concern.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

"I feel like it's my fault. Swoopstrike died saving me," Autumnleap muttered quietly, his eyes flicking back open. "I owe him my life, and I never even got to thank him for it."

Frostmask gently laid her tail on his flank.

"First of all, he wouldn't've wanted your thanks," Frostmask said quietly. "That wasn't his way. And, secondly, it's not your fault Autumnleap."

She gave a quiet, melancholy purr as she leaned over to gently nudge his shoulder with her muzzle.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're not that special," she said, a hint of playfulness entering into her voice. "Swoopstrike cared about everyone in ShadowClan, Paledusk could've been attacking any of our clan-mates, and Swoopstrike would've done the same thing to save them."

Autumnleap glanced at her, and Frostmask's gaze darkened.

"So, it wasn't you that got Swoopstrike killed. It was Paledusk," she said with another quiet growl.

Autumnleap gently lay one of his paws on hers.

"And, I'm sure Sedgestar won't let SkyClan get away with it so easily," he said. "Tonight's a full moon, right? He's bound to say something at the Gathering."

The Gathering!

Frostmask felt a cold rush surge through her. She had forgotten that it was so close to the night of the full moon. What *was* Sedgestar's plan?

Frostmask's claws slid out.

And, if she went to the Gathering... would she see Paledusk there? ...What would she do if she did?

Frostmask shook her head sharply, like she was trying to shake the dark thoughts out of her mind. She glanced back outside again. The sun had made it over the horizon and the morning was in full effect now. The camp was busy; cats were out greeting each other and bustling out on patrols.

"I forgot about the Gathering," she murmured. "I hope Sedgestar takes me."

Frostmask got to her paws, giving her pelt a brisk shake.

"I better go," Frostmask said. "I don't want to make a bad impression on Grovepelt and Sedgestar on my very first days as a warrior. Especially if I want Sedgestar to pick me for the Gathering!"

Autumnleap shot her a rueful look.

"I wish I could come. I hate that I have to spend my first sunrises as a warrior stuck in the medicine cat den. I should be out there with you, taking care of the clan!" he meowed.

Frostmask dipped her head to touch her nose to his ear briefly in farewell.

"Don't feel bad about being in the medicine cat's den! You're recovering," she meowed, pulling her head back. "I promise, I'll come visit again soon."

"You better," Autumnleap said with a purr.

Frostmask waved her tail in goodbye to him and Clearstream as she padded out of the den.

When Frostmask emerged from the medicine cat's den, she spotted Poolcloud and Pineshade grooming themselves in a pool of sunshine outside of the warriors' den. She padded over to them, purring in greeting.

"Autumnleap's awake!" she meowed as she approached them.

Poolcloud paused mid-wash, his paw still lifted to rub against his face and a tuft of long fur sticking up on the top of his head.

"That's great!" Poolcloud purred, lowering his paw. "How's he doing?"

"He still seems to be in some pain, but his mood is good," Frostmask said, sitting next to them. "He's already impatient to get out of the medicine cat's den."

Pineshade snorted, carefully finishing her grooming and lifting her head.

"Now that he's properly awake, I bet before tomorrow's sunrise, Autumnleap will already be annoying the whiskers off Elmclaw and Clearstream by begging them to allow him out of his nest," Pineshade said.

Poolcloud purred.

"I'll take that bet," Poolcloud meowed. "But, I'm placing my guess on before the Gathering patrol leaves tonight. Loser has to catch the winner the fattest piece of prey they can find."

"Deal," Pineshade said, nodding solemnly at him. "Grovepelt told us to go on a hunting patrol anyway. We can scout out the best prey spots."

Poolcloud inclined his head at Frostmask.

"Want to get in on this?" he asked. "Then the winner can have *two* fat pieces of prey."

Frostmask purred.

"I don't think I could eat two fat pieces of prey in one sitting," Frostmask said.

"Well I can!" Poolcloud said, widening his eyes at her.

"And, then make yourself sick," Pineshade muttered, giving an eye-roll. "Remember when we were four moons old, and you tried to eat an entire squirrel by yourself? It was almost the same size as you!"

"Autumnleap dare me to, so if I hadn't tried, I'd have been dishonored by backing out of it!" Poolcloud protested, grabbing his chest with his paw in mock offense.

Pineshade snickered.

"That would've been dishonorable? Right, because you looked *so* dignified when you spent all night vomiting," she said, her amber eyes gleaming wickedly.

Frostmask shook her head, half amused and half exasperated by their teasing.

"I'll at least join you two on your hunting patrol," Frostmask interjected, hoping to steer the conversation back on topic.

"Sounds good," Poolcloud meowed cheerily, while Pineshade nodded in agreement.

Frostmask purred. So far, she thought that one of the best parts of being a warrior was being able to pick who you got to patrol with. She'd get to spend everyday with her friends.

And, hopefully never have to see Dampfang's dumb face on patrol again...

Poolcloud's gaze brightened.

"And, I'll see if Dewleaf might want to join us too!" he said, springing to his paws. "I think she was still sleeping in the den."

Frostmask purred while Pineshade rolled her eyes at her brother's obvious enthusiasm to find the grey she-cat.

"Uh, Poolcloud, you might want to flatten that big piece of fur sticking up on your head first," Frostmask purred, pointing her paw at it.

"Yeah. Or, else she might mistake you for a very big, ugly hedgehog," Pineshade said sarcastically.

Poolcloud flattened the fur with a quick few swipes of his paw.

"That was a close one! Thanks guys!" he meowed cheerfully, ducking into the entrance of the warrior's den.

Pineshade glared after him as Poolcloud vanished into the warrior's den.

"Great, now we have to spend the whole patrol watching Poolcloud mooning over Dewleaf," Pineshade muttered to Frostmask.

Frostmask's brow furrowed at her bitter tone.

"I don't know... I think they're kinda cute together," Frostmask said, pushing back gently.

Pineshade just gave a huff of disagreement. Frostmask studied Pineshade's face. Her ears were back, and she was scowling irritably now, even though she had been in a good mood, making bets with Poolcloud, only moments earlier. Frostmask's tail twitched.

Why did Poolcloud and Dewleaf together bother her so much? Poolcloud had a crush on Dewleaf ever since he was a young apprentice, and Pineshade never seemed so opposed to it then.

But, maybe it's not really about Poolcloud or Dewleaf...

Before Frostmask could say anything else, Poolcloud and Dewleaf emerged from the den.

"Let's get going!" Poolcloud said.

The four of them padded through the forest in the direction of the marsh. It was a warm day for leaf-fall, and they were hopeful they would be able to find prey hanging out near the river bank.

Frostmask kept an eye on Pineshade as the group padded along. Frostmask was walking alongside Dewleaf and Poolcloud, but the two of them were wrapped up in their own little bubble, chatting with each other and laughing at their own inside jokes. Pineshade trailed behind the three of them, her head hung low, and her tail twitching in annoyance. Once they made it to the tall marsh grasses, Frostmask paused, clearing her throat.

"Why don't we split up to cover more ground?" she said. "Some of us can go upstream and the others downstream? If prey's not running well here today, we can meet back here in a bit and try somewhere else."

"Good idea," Dewleaf meowed, nodding in agreement.

"Great. Pineshade and I will go downstream then," Frostmask said, shooting Pineshade a look.

"Sure!" Poolcloud said. "See you guys in a bit!"

Frostmask nodded in goodbye, turning with Pineshade to head in the opposite direction as them. Pineshade seemed to perk up as they padded off, her tail lifting.

"Thanks for the save, Frostmask," Pineshade meowed. "I don't think I'd have lasted a whole hunt stuck with those love-struck doves."

Frostmask made herself purr lightly in amusement, but she also felt a pin-prick of nervousness in her paws.

She really had wanted to get Pineshade alone to talk about what was wrong with her, but cornering Pineshade about her feelings was like cornering a snake— she was quite liable to strike back at any moment.

Frostmask decided to proceed with caution.

"Dewleaf and Poolcloud together really bother you, huh?" Frostmask meowed quietly.

Pineshade snorted.

"That's an understatement," she meowed. "But, yeah. I mean, nothing against Dewleaf; she's actually pretty cool when she's not being all gross with Poolcloud."

Frostmask nodded, weaving around a thick patch of reeds.

"But, aren't you happy that Poolcloud is so happy? And, Dewleaf is too?" Frostmask said mildly, her eyes flickering over to her.

Pineshade's eyes narrowed, and she shot Frostmask a look. Frostmask tensed in preparation of a verbal lashing if she had pushed too hard, but Pineshade just let out a sharp sigh.

"Well, I guess," Pineshade muttered, kicking a pebble as they walked. "You know I care about that oaf. And, I'm also glad Dewleaf is happy, even if she's happy with my dumb brother."

"Then why does it make you so upset?" Frostmask prompted gently.

Pineshade's ears flattened, and she scowled.

"Look, I don't know. Why are you asking me these things?" Pineshade said defensively, a soft growl entering her voice.

Frostmask's ears flickered uneasily, unable to keep eye contact with her any longer.

"I don't know..." Frostmask meowed hesitantly. "I guess, I thought, it maybe actually had something to do with Dampfang..."

Pineshade froze at the sound of his name, coming to a sudden stop. Frostmask stopped walking too, wincing as she glanced over at Pineshade and took in her expression. Pineshade looked equal parts shocked and furious. She was staring at Frostmask with wide amber eyes, her black fur bristling slightly, and she was digging her claws into the peaty ground. She looked like she was a heartbeat away from launching herself at Frostmask. Frostmask shied back from

her.

"Uh, please don't hit me," Frostmask meowed, already tensing in preparation.

"I'm not going to hit you," Pineshade snapped, although she was still tense and bristling like she was about to leap into battle.

"I— oh. You're not?" Frostmask said, blinking a bit in surprise.

Pineshade rolled her eyes, giving a frustrated growl, but she forced the fur on her back to lie flat.

"No, frog-brain," Pineshade meowed irritably. "You're my friend."

Frostmask's eyes widened, but then she felt a rush of warmth in her chest.

She thinks I'm her friend!

Frostmask raised her tail happily, but it began to droop again as she saw how angry Pineshade still looked.

"I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't've brought it up..." Frostmask meowed apologetically.

Pineshade shook her head sharply.

"I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at *him,*" Pineshade growled.

"...Dampfang?" Frostmask meowed softly.

"Yes, of course Dampfang!" Pineshade exploded, scoring her claws through the peat, before she composed herself again.

Pineshade shook her head, glaring down at the ground.

"You're right. I hate seeing Poolcloud and Dewleaf so happy together because all it does is remind me of how terrible Dampfang was to me. In the beginning, I thought he liked me too. My whole life, I've been nothing but nice and helpful to him," Pineshade growled. "But, then after he became a warrior, how does he treat

me in response? By ignoring me for moons, just because he thinks I'm not as important as him because I was an apprentice."

Frostmask took a step closer to Pineshade.

"Dampfang's a fox-heart," Frostmask said. "And, I think you're *way* more important than he is."

Pineshade glanced up at her. A rare vulnerability shown in her amber eyes.

"The way he treated you wasn't your fault," Frostmask continued gently, sitting down next to her. "You know I've never liked Dampfang since he's always been mean to me. But, the way he treated you, when you were always nice to him, proves how bad he is. He's just a rotten cat."

Pineshade shifted her weight from paw to paw uncertainly.

"I mean, he hasn't always been so terrible," she muttered. "Since I yelled at him, I've been trying to avoid him, but he's actually been being really sweet to me. It's just so confusing because I'm still really upset about everything. He was so cold and distant to me before when I was being nice to him, and now he's not... even though now I'm angry at him..."

Frostmask's brow furrowed, anger building in her chest. Dampfang didn't deserve to be with Pineshade after being so horrible to her!

"I think you should stay away from him. He's a disgusting piece of snake-dung!" Frostmask spat, lashing her tail.

Frostmask blinked in surprise as Pineshade suddenly burst into laughter, her loud purrs ringing out through the marsh.

"Whoa! Fierce Frostmask! I don't think I've ever seen you speak about someone so harshly," Pineshade purred, playfully flicking Frostmask's side with her tail.

One of Frostmask's ears flattened lopsidedly as her pelt heated in embarrassment from her teasing, but she still gave a purr back in response.

But, as Pineshade's purrs quieted down, the black she-cat suddenly shifted uncomfortably, glancing away from Frostmask and to the ground.

"What's wrong?" Frostmask meowed, her ears pricking in concern.

Pineshade sighed quietly.

"Well, what you said... I know Dampfang was always mean to you. And, I know I used to be mean to you too," Pineshade muttered. "I was doing it partly to try to impress him..."

Frostmask's ears flicked back.

"I know," Frostmask muttered, looking away from her. "Or, I figured, at least... You started being much more nice to me, the less time you spent with him."

Pineshade swallowed, her face nervous as her tail tip twitched.

"Also, when you first showed up here, and Redclaw took you in..." Pineshade muttered, continuing. "I was also kinda afraid that you'd... replace me. You were always so much nicer than me, even when I was being horrible to you..."

Pineshade anxiously tore up the peat under her with her claws.

"I thought Redclaw liked you better than me," Pineshade confessed, her ears flattening. "That she wished you were her daughter instead of me."

Frostmask glanced over at her.

"Redclaw raised me like she raised you, but she loves you too and would never want to replace you," Frostmask meowed softly.

Pineshade gave a forced purr.

"Well I know that *now*..." she meowed, and she glanced back over at Frostmask. "But, I'm sorry for being such dumb, frog-brained kit before. And, I understand if you still hate me a bit because of it..."

Frostmask paused, hesitantly moving her tail over to touch Pineshade's side with it.

"It's okay," she murmured, looking down at the ground. "I'm not mad. The truth is, I used to be so lonely in ShadowClan that all I wanted was some friends. I never hated you. Even when you were being mean to me, all I wanted was for you to like me..."

Frostmask felt Pineshade's eyes on her, and she lifted her gaze back from the ground to meet hers.

"Why don't we put that all behind us now and just start over?" Frostmask meowed, her blue gaze searching Pineshade's amber one. "As friends?"

Pineshade's ears perked up, her eyes brightening with happiness and relief. She nodded hard.

"Yeah. Friends," she agreed with a purr.

It was evening by the time that Frostmask, Pineshade, Poolcloud and Dewleaf made it back to the camp, each of them loaded down with prey. After hunting separately in the marsh for a while, the four of them had met back up and headed into the pine forest to hunt together. Frostmask had noticed Pineshade seemed a bit less irritated with Poolcloud and Dewleaf when they rejoined them.

As they dropped off their prey, Frostmask noticed that a lot of cats were milling about the camp.

"It looks like Sedgestar's going to announce who's attending the Gathering soon," Poolcloud meowed, following her gaze.

"I'm starving," Dewleaf declared. "Let's get something to eat while we wait for him."

The four of them each grabbed a piece of prey and headed over to the crowd to sit together and chat and eat. It wasn't long until Sedgestar bounded up the Clanrock.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather under Clanrock for a clan meeting," Sedgestar said.

The few cats that remained in their dens came padding out, and quiet fell over the camp as everyone turned to look up at their leader.

"First, I would like to announce what warriors and apprentices will be joining us at the Gathering tonight," Sedgestar said. "Emberflower, Darkpelt, Fogfur, Dappledpelt, Leafbreeze, Dustleap, Hootflight, Thornheart, Dewleaf, Frostmask, Mosspaw and Murmurpaw."

"Aw, no fair," Poolcloud whispered when his name wasn't called.

Dewleaf gave him a light shove.

"Frostmask and I are going to have so much fun without you," she said teasingly.

But, Frostmask didn't feel excited, instead a chill ran through her.

She would get to see Paledusk tonight.

Frostmask narrowed her eyes, just able to keep her claws from curling out.

Sedgestar hadn't yet finished his announcements though, and he sat with his tail wrapped around his paws from his perch on Clanrock, looking very cool and collected.

"I know many of you must be wondering what I plan to say at the Gathering, following the death of Swoopstrike and the battle of the SkyClan camp," Sedgestar said measuredly. "After much consideration and deliberation with Grovepelt I have decided to refrain from declaring war on SkyClan... At least for now."

Sedgestar paused, clearly anticipating the few yowls of protest that rang out through the camp following his words. Frostmask, however, just glared up at him in silence, her jaw clenched.

So there will be no justice for Swoopstrike's murder?! Paledusk deserves to pay for what he did!

Frostmask glanced around the camp to study the other warriors'

faces, trying to take stock of their feelings on the matter. She noticed Dampfang was on his feet, one of the cats who had yowled out in protest.

This is the one time in my life when I actually agree with him...

Sedgestar sat there silently, his face expressionless like a statue as he waited for the protests to quiet.

"Let me continue," he meowed after the last of the yowls died out. "We all know that these battles we've been fighting against SkyClan have been for ThunderClan's war. Not for ours."

"Then ThunderClan should pay!" Marshnose snarled, loudly interrupting the leader.

"ThunderClan *has*," Sedgestar said, his amber eyes flashing in a hint of anger at the interruption before he collected himself again. "ThunderClan owes us a debt that they *will* pay us back for."

"How do you know that," Marshnose grumbled, much quieter this time but still looking a bit mutinous. "I don't trust those mice-munchers."

Sedgestar inclined his head at him.

"You don't have to trust them. Trust me when I'm telling you that they will give us our due when we need it," Sedgestar said, before lifting his gaze from Marshnose to address the whole clan again. "It was a horrible tragedy that Swoopstrike lost his life in one of these battles. But, more lives will surely be lost if we wage a war of vengeance against SkyClan. I will wait to read Fennelstar's actions and words at the Gathering, because if he is aggressive towards us then we will have no choice but to fight back. However, I do not anticipate declaring a war tonight."

There were no protests to this, although some warriors still glared up at Sedgestar stonily. Sedgestar slowly nodded his head as he took in their expressions.

"I understand that many of you are angry at SkyClan and want justice for Swoopstrike's death. I do too. But, I don't think a war

would be the right move for us at this moment," Sedgestar said, pausing for a heartbeat before he flattened his ears in a somewhat roguish expression. "However... that doesn't mean that we can't get some revenge in a different way."

Frostmask blinked, a wave of curiosity washing over her. What could Sedgestar mean? The rest of the clan seemed to almost eagerly lean forward, towards their leader, looking equally as intrigued.

Sedgestar unwrapped his tail from around his paws to flick it behind him.

"I am allowing indefinite use of the thunderpath tunnel beneath ThunderClan territory as a means to get into SkyClan territory," Sedgestar announced, lifting his chin. "Patrols may go there to hunt on SkyClan land. It is up to any cat's discretion to choose to hunt there, although you must clear it with me or Grovepelt first before departing."

A shiver of anticipation ran up Frostmask's spine. Was Sedgestar really allowing them to hunt on another Clan's territory?! Frostmask dug her claws into the ground, a swirling mixture of trepidation and excitement in her belly.

"A few rules," Sedgestar said, continuing. "I will only allow hunts under the cover of darkness. If you are not back by dawn, I will assume you have been injured or captured and respond accordingly. So, don't be late. No solo hunts; you must go in patrols of three warriors or more in case you run into trouble. And, speaking of running into trouble, these are *hunting missions,* not battle patrols. You are absolutely *not* to seek out and engage any SkyClan warriors that you come across. Or, ThunderClan for that matter. Spend as little time as possible in ThunderClan territory. After you emerge from the tunnel, head from there to Fourtrees, then turn into SkyClan land. Do not hunt on ThunderClan land. And, try not to be seen by anyone, ThunderClan, SkyClan, or otherwise. It goes without saying to disguise your scents. Be like ghosts in the night."

As soon as Sedgestar finished, eager snarls of support echoed through the camp. Sedgestar reclined a bit, his expression pleased

as he watched his warriors gaze up at him with bright eyes and pelts that bristled in excitement.

"SkyClan will not bleed from our claws this time, but they will still feel the sting of our revenge in their empty bellies," Sedgestar said coolly before flicking his tail to indicate dismissal from the meeting and bounding down from the Clanrock.

The Ancient Clans

Allegiances:

Cats outside of Clans:

Deceased: May— a thin, fluffy grey-point she-cat with blue eyes (Former mate: Paledusk. Mother of Frostmask)

ShadowClan:

Leader: Sedgestar— a light brown, long legged, tabby tom with amber eyes (mate: Emberflower)

Deputy: Grovepelt— a pale brown tom with a greying muzzle and green eyes

Medicine cats: Clearstream— a fluffy light grey tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Elmclaw— a massive dark tabby tom with green eyes

Warriors: Emberflower— a ginger she-cat with green eyes (mate: Sedgestar)

Larkfoot— a pale tabby she-cat (mate: Darkpelt)

Darkpelt— a massive black tom (mate: Larkfoot)

Weaseltail— a brown tabby and white tom with amber eyes and a long tail (mate: Redclaw)

Redclaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat with dark ginger patches and

green eyes (mate: Weaseltail)

Kestrelmoon— a pale cream tom (mate: Amberberry)

Amberberry— a fluffy golden she-cat (mate: Kestrelmoon)

Dustleap—a light ginger tom (mate: Dawntail)

Marshnose— a brown tabby tom with a white muzzle

Fogfur— a fluffy grey tom with green eyes

Dappledpelt— a tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Mosspaw— a pale cream she-cat

Rowanheart— a ginger tom (mate: Snakeeyes)

Beeclaw— a black tom with green eyes

Hootflight— a grey tom

Thornheart— a brown tabby tom

Apprentice: Murmurpaw— a fluffy pale golden she-cat

Leafbreeze— a grey tabby she-cat

Dampfang— a large, sleek-furred black tom with green eyes and a single torn ear

Dewleaf— a fluffy grey she-cat with blue-green eyes

Pineshade— a spiky-furred black she-cat with amber eyes

Poolcloud— a large, fluffy black and white tom with amber eyes

Autumnleap— a fluffy dark ginger and white tom with amber eyes and a long scar down his belly

Frostmask— a fluffy tabby grey-point she-cat with tufted ears, blue eyes, and white paws

Queens: Snakeeyes— a sleek white she-cat with a blue eye and a green eye (mate: Rowanheart. Yewkit—a silver tabby tom, Featherkit— a tortoiseshell she-cat, Lizardkit— a deaf, white tom with blue eyes)

Dawntail— a fluffy grey and white she-cat (mate: Dustleap. Cedarkit— a dark brown tabby tom. Buzzardkit— a pale grey tabby tom. Cricketkit— a fluffy grey and cream tortoiseshell she-cat Hollowkit— a mostly black tortoiseshell she-cat)

Elders: Treefur— a dark brown tom with poor eyesight

Greytail— a grey she-cat

Flymask— a black and white tom

SkyClan:

Leader: Fennelstar— a pale brown tom with bushy fur

Deputy: Paledusk— a white tom with long, sleek fur, tufted ears, green eyes, and a scarred face

Medicine cat: Swallowfur— a blue-grey she-cat

Warriors: Sparrowheart— a dappled brown tabby she-cat

Cloudleap— a long legged grey and white tom

Apprentice: Mottledpaw— a beautiful tortoiseshell cat with striking markings and hazel eyes

Brokenbranch— a ginger tom with a bend in his tail

Doepelt— a light brown tabby she-cat

Mapleflight— a dark ginger tom

Apprentice: Spottedpaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Stormfang— a grey tom

Apprentice: Sootpaw— a black tom

Suneyes— a grey she-cat with bright amber eyes

Yewstalk— a dark brown tabby tom

Larchtail— a light brown tabby she-cat

Aspenbreeze— a grey she-cat

Oakflight— a grey tabby and white tom

Queens: Poppyfur— a tortoiseshell she-cat (Galekit— a grey tabby tom, Flykit— a black tom)

Elders: Birdstrike— a heavily scarred, pale grey and white she-cat

RiverClan:

Leader: Willowstar— a grey tabby, sleek furred she-cat

Deputy: Perchpelt— a brown tabby tom

Medicine cat: Pebblestripe— a dark grey tabby tom

Apprentice: Hailpaw— a white and grey she-cat

Warriors: Violetfur— a black she-cat

Stoneripple— a grey tabby tom

Apprentice: Finchpaw— a pale ginger tom

Waterwhisker— a fluffy ginger and white she-cat

Heronfur— a brown tabby tom

Reedheart— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Apprentice: Ivypaw— a tan and cream tortoiseshell she-cat

Sandpelt— a pale ginger she-cat

Ospreyscar— a brown and white tom with a long scar down his side

Rainspot— a dappled black and white she-cat

Turtleshell— a brown and white tom

Murkfoot— a black tom

Otterfang— a dark brown she-cat

Queens: Wavepelt— a grey she-cat with long, wavy fur

Elders: Fishtail— a white and grey tom with a long tail

Sleekclaw— a nearly blind, once beautiful tabby she-cat

ThunderClan:

Leader: Morningstar— a large, pale grey tom

Deputy: Acornear— a brown tom

Apprentice: Duskpaw— a black she-cat

Medicine cat: Fallowtuft— a pale brown and white tom

Warriors: Pineclaw— a dark brown tom with a big rip in one ear

Apprentice: Barredpaw— a dark brown tom

Beechfur— a brown tabby tom

Apprentice: Seedpaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Fernclaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Apprentice: Screechpaw— a dark brown tabby tom

Nettlepelt— a dark grey she-cat with spiky fur

Juniperfrost— a grey and cream tortoiseshell she-cat

Foxbite— a ginger she-cat with unusually long fangs

Apprentice: Brackenpaw— a golden she-cat

Queens: Birchtail— a grey and white tom (Cloverkit— a grey tabby she-cat. Boulderkit— a grey tom. Squirrelkit— a brown tabby tom. Their mother is Brambledapple, deceased)

Elders: Pearnose— a dark brown tabby she-cat (retired medicine cat)

WindClan:

Leader: Rabbitstar— a light ginger tom with large ears

Deputy: Wheatfur— a golden tabby she-cat

Apprentice: Lavenderpaw— a grey and cream she-cat

Medicine cat: Falconpelt— a brown tabby tom

Warriors: Thrushleap— a tan tabby she-cat (mate to Rabbitstar)

Tumblefox— a ginger tom

Runningfoot— a dark tabby tom

Oatbreeze— a tortoiseshell and white she-cat

Apprentice: Honeypaw— a tan tabby and cream she-cat with spots of white

Volefur— a pale grey tom

Pounceclaw— a black tom

Apprentice: Harepaw— a brown tabby and white tom

Nighteyes— a black and white she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice: Ryepaw— a tan tom

Stormcloud— a grey tabby and white tom

Apprentice: Deerpaw— a grey tom

Eagleflight— a golden-brown tom

Queens: Slatepelt— a grey she-cat (Flipkit— a pale brown tom, Pigeonkit— a grey and white she-cat)

Elders: None

Family Secrets

Frostmask padded through the forest, the only noise the soft sound of paw-steps on the pine needle covered floor. Their patrol mutely walked in single file on their way to the Gathering, and for the first time since her warrior's vigil, Frostmask was left alone with just her thoughts, which just happened to be the *exact* situation that she'd rather avoid. Without external distractions, she couldn't stop her mind from turning to darker emotions, to thoughts about pain and grief.

Frostmask took a deep, slow breath.

Although the day had brought happiness when Autumnleap had woken up and when she got to spend some relaxing time with Pineshade and Poolcloud, she still felt the loss of Swoopstrike like a heavy boulder pressing down on her back. She felt like she was drowning in the river again, struggling to swim up, but too tired and weighed down to reach the surface.

And, this time there was no Swoopstrike to pull her to safety and save her.

Because he was dead.

Frostmask clenched her jaw, biting the inside of her cheek. She felt a sting of pain, but it was almost relieving. It was a distraction, and physical pain hurt much less than the pain she felt inside.

Although, Frostmask was grateful that she at least had a burning purpose to focus on through the internal pain. It was something that she could use to harness the pain, driving herself forward, instead of just staying trapped by it, drowning in the mire... She could focus on hurting Paledusk.

Frostmask's claws slid out as she walked. She would raid as much prey from SkyClan land as she could. Paledusk took Swoopstrike from her, and she would make him pay for it. So, he'd hurt like she

was.

A shudder ran down her spine. It felt good to have that focus. It made the pain feel a bit less meaningless, like she was doing something to help it.

But, there was still a black pit in her heart which no amount of vengeance could fill, because no matter how much she managed to hurt Paledusk, to make him suffer, deep down she knew that the task was hollow. It could never accomplish want she truly wanted—to have Swoopstrike back. Nothing could.

Frostmask blinked, pulled out of her thoughts as Sedgestar halted the patrol with a flick of his tail. They were now standing on the crest of the hill that led down into the Fourtrees' hollow. Their orderly line broke ranks as cats grouped around Sedgestar to peer down at the dark, flickering forms of the already gathered cats. Frostmask padded forward to the crest, opening her jaws to drink in the cool night air. She could scent WindClan and SkyClan on the breeze. ThunderClan and RiverClan seemed to have not yet arrived.

Sedgestar nodded, and the ShadowClan patrol streamed forward, bounding down the hill. The group brushed through the bushes surrounding the clearing, but the ShadowClan patrol lingered by the edge of the hollow for a moment. No one seemed particularly eager to join WindClan, and *especially* not SkyClan.

Frostmask felt like every hair on her pelt stood on end in anticipation as she gazed tensely around at the groups of cats. She was searching for a white pelt, something she both did and didn't want to find. But, Frostmask couldn't spot Paledusk's form anywhere in the crowd.

Frostmask gave her head a small shake. Perhaps it was for the best. She probably shouldn't be looking to pick fights at a Gathering anyway.

The rest of the ShadowClan patrol seemed to decided that they would mingle, at least a bit, so they slowly padded into the crowd. Frostmask's gaze flickered over to a small group of young WindClan warriors, and she began to walk in their direction.

"You're back!" a familiar, rasping voice hissed through the crowd.

Frostmask's eyes widened in surprise, and she turned to see the grey and white SkyClan elder stalking over to her, her clumpy fur bristling.

Birdstrike, Frostmask thought, remembering her name.

"Hello," Frostmask muttered, dipping her head to her. "Birdstrike, right? How are you doing? I hope you weren't injured in the battle."

"What are you doing here?" Birdstrike growled, lashing her tail as she ignored Frostmask's questions.

Frostmask inclined her head at her in confusion.

"Uh, it's a Gathering," she meowed.

"Gatherings are for clan-cats," Birdstrike spat. "Not for cats like you. Get out of here."

Frostmask felt the fur down her back raise in anger. How did Birdstrike know she wasn't clan-born? Had her pelt pattern given her away? But, Birdstrike was a senile elder, wasn't she? Or, was she not as confused as she seemed?

"I'm a ShadowClan cat," Frostmask said, a soft growl in her voice.

Birdstrike laughed harshly.

"Oh yeah? And, I'm a mouse," Birdstrike spat, narrowing her eyes at Frostmask.

The elder stalked closer to Frostmask, her back hunching as her posture became more threatening.

"Stay out of SkyClan territory, you loner scum," Birdstrike growled, her eyes growing foggy as if she was losing herself in her mind. "You're here for him, aren't you?!"

"I'm not," Frostmask said quickly, trying to calm the elder as she stepped away from her.

It was just like she had said to Frostmask during the battle. But, what would Frostmask do if Birdstrike launched herself at her, like she had done then? She was an old elder, so Frostmask wouldn't fight back. But, it was still a Gathering; would StarClan be angered by Birdstrike pouncing at her?

"I won't let you take him," Birdstrike screeched, her foggy eyes wild. "You won't have my son!"

"Birdstrike!"

The elder jolted as Paledusk's clear, loud voice broke through the sounds of chatting cats all around her.

"Step away from her," Paledusk growled.

The SkyClan deputy stalked over to Frostmask and the SkyClan elder, glowering at Frostmask the whole while. Frostmask felt a rush of ice-cold adrenaline through her body as her muscles tensed. She raised her chin, meeting Paledusk's gaze evenly and not caring that her lip curled up in a snarl of fury and disgust at the sight of him. She dug her claws into the ground, clumping mud under her feet.

A new wound had been added to Paledusk's face— a red line that started on his forehead, swept diagonally downwards, narrowly missing the inner corner of his left eye and ending at his nose. It looked like someone had tried to claw out his eyes and just missed.

Frostmask felt a spiteful jolt of satisfaction at the sight. She hoped that it was Swoopstrike who left that deep wound on his face. And, she hoped it would scar like the crescent mark on his cheek, so as long as he lived, Paledusk would carry with him the memory of Swoopstrike's claws forever.

Frostmask's tail began to lash as Paledusk's green gaze continued to bore into her own. A growl started to rumble louder, and louder, in her throat.

Suddenly Paledusk's gaze broke from hers, and he turned to nudge Birdstrike roughly away, ignoring Frostmask.

"Come on, Birdstrike," Paledusk growled.

"What's going on? Stop shoving me," Birdstrike hissed, raking Paledusk with a suspicious gaze and planting her feet firmly to the ground.

She clearly wasn't going to be peacefully led away. Paledusk made an impatient noise in his throat somewhere between a growl and a sigh.

"It's me," Paledusk said.

Birdstrike blinked, squinting in confusion.

Frostmask's brow furrowed. So, Birdstrike was still confused; she didn't even recognize her own deputy. Then how did she know about Frostmask's non-clan heritage?

"...Icerunner?" Birdstrike meowed hesitantly.

Paledusk huffed in annoyance.

"No. Paledusk. Your son, Paledusk," Paledusk growled.

Frostmask felt a jolt surge through her, her ears pricking in surprise.

Paledusk is Birdstrike's son? He's the cat she's been talking about?!

"Of course. Paledusk," Birdstrike snapped. "I know you're Paledusk. Stop talking to me as if I wouldn't recognize my own son."

"Good," Paledusk rumbled. "Come with me."

Birdstrike now allowed Paledusk to guide her a few steps away.

"Where's Slatewhisker?" Birdstrike meowed. "I haven't seen him anywhere."

"Slatewhisker's gone, Birdstrike," Paledusk growled.

Birdstrike came back to a sudden stop, having only allowed Paledusk to move her a few tail lengths from Frostmask.

"Gone? What do you mean gone?" she said, her voice increasing in volume to become a panicked screech at the end.

"Shh!" Paledusk hissed at her, lashing his tail as he noticed that Birdstrike had attracted curious glances from neighboring cats.

"What I mean is that he's waiting for us back at camp," Paledusk rumbled, the impatience leaving his voice to suddenly become low and soothing. "He wasn't picked to come to the Gathering, remember?"

"Oh." Birdstrike relaxed, her gaze growing cloudy. "That's right."

"Right," Paledusk agreed, going back to guiding her away.

They vanished into the crowd, leaving Frostmask stared intently after them. Her fur still stood on end and all her muscles were tense.

Thoughts in Frostmask's mind were spinning around like strands of spiderwebs, colliding, tangling, knotting up. But, Frostmask couldn't quite see the pattern of the web yet. There were pieces still missing, and they prevented her from putting together the whole picture. But, she was *so* close. It was like a scent on the breeze that she couldn't quite catch.

Frostmask dug her claws into the ground, her brow furrowed in concentration.

It was all so strange. Birdstrike recognized Frostmask and knew she wasn't clan-born. But, Birdstrike *couldn't* know Frostmask, not really. It was impossible. Maybe she had heard from her clan-mates that Frostmask had been adopted into ShadowClan, but she had never met her before the battle. And, yet, Birdstrike spoke to her as if Frostmask was someone she met before and despised.

But... what if Birdstrike *didn't* know Frostmask, and instead she thought she was someone else? Birdstrike hadn't recognized Larchtail during the battle, or Paledusk just now either. She had called them both other cat's names— Doepelt for Larchtail, and Icerunner for Paledusk.

Frostmask's chest tensed up.

Paledusk had known May... could his mother had known her too? What if... Birdstrike thought Frostmask *was* May?

A rush surged through her as she kneaded her claws impatiently into the ground. The feeling of certainty was growing bigger inside her.

Yes. Yes, that must be it. Birdstrike *knew* things about May; Frostmask could feel it in her bones. Maybe this elder was the key; Frostmask's way of finding out of the truth about her mother. How May knew about the Clans. Why May chose to bring her to ShadowClan out of everywhere else. How Paledusk knew May...

Frostmask gave her head a shake.

But, the answers were hidden deep inside of the elder's clouded mind, and the poor she-cat already seemed like she barely knew where she was half the time.

Frostmask's eyes narrowed.

Also, now that Paledusk had seen Frostmask and Birdstrike together, he'd surely be watching his mother like a hawk.

When Frostmask had last asked Paledusk how he knew May, he had been so defensive. And, now he snatched Birdstrike away from Frostmask so quickly, once he saw them talking... It seemed clear that whatever Birdstrike knew, he didn't want anyone, especially Frostmask, to find out.

If I even wanted to talk to Birdstrike tonight, would I be able to get her away from him?

Frostmask's ears twitched. Maybe it would be best to wait for a better time. But, on the other paw, Birdstrike was old and frail... If Frostmask wanted to ask her anything, this Gathering may be her only opportunity. Who knew if Frostmask would be able to ever speak to her again?

I can't lose this chance.

Mind made up, Frostmask rose to her paws, and slipped into the crowd after Birdstrike and Paledusk.

RiverClan and ThunderClan had just arrived, and now the clearing was very crowded with bodies. Weaving around groups of chatting cats, Frostmask spotted Paledusk off to the edge of the clearing, near the group of medicine cats. She could see Paledusk by a blue-grey she-cat; SkyClan's medicine cat, Swallowfur, while Birdstrike sat a few tail-lengths away, staring blankly out into the crowd. Frostmask noticed Swallowfur scowling at Paledusk, while the SkyClan deputy's mouth moved. But, Frostmask was too far away to hear what he was saying. Frostmask padded closer, sticking to the crowd to try to remain unseen by him, and Paledusk's voice drifted into her ears.

"...hardly knows where she is, or what she's saying," Paledusk was meowing in a low voice to Swallowfur. "I think this is the last Gathering she should attend."

"Why?" Swallowfur protested. "Her mind may be deteriorating, but her body still works fine. She's able to make the trek here no problem. I think the change in scenery is good for her. She gets to see and speak to elders from other clans that she recognizes from her youth. Everyone from her generation in our clan has passed on. How would you feel if your life was only sitting in a cave all by yourself all day, watching cats you hardly remember walk by your den?"

"Birdstrike's become a liability," Paledusk growled.

"A liability?" Swallowfur repeated incredulously with a harsh laugh. "Dear StarClan, you talk about her as if she's a mad dog, not a retired, respected SkyClan warrior! And, your mother no less!"

Paledusk gave another frustrated growl.

"I don't have time for this right now. Keep an eye on her, and we'll talk about this later," he snapped, turning his back on Swallowfur.

He started heading towards the Great Rock to take his position as a deputy at its base. Frostmask's gaze flickered back to Birdstrike to

see Swallowfur had risen to her paws as well, and she was now gently guiding Birdstrike over to a group of elders, speaking softly in one of Birdstrike's tattered ears as they walked. A wave of anticipation rushed over Frostmask.

Now's my chance to talk to Birdstrike before the Gathering starts!

"Hey."

Frostmask jolted suddenly at the voice. Larchtail padded up to her slowly, her steps hesitant, and her expression shy.

Snake-dung!

Frostmask shot another quick glance after Birdstrike. She'd have to get rid of Larchtail in order to talk to Birdstrike, but how?

But, before she could say anything, Larchtail's gaze flicked from Frostmask to Birdstrike, tracing the path of Frostmask's gaze.

"Birdstrike's doing fine... Thanks to you," Larchtail mumbled before looking down at her paws. "I know the relationship between our Clans isn't the best right now. But, I wanted to thank you still. Helping me and also standing up to your clan-mate... You didn't have to do that."

Frostmask gaze flickered back over to Larchtail. Her stomach swirled with indecision and distrust. Larchtail had always been kind to her at Gatherings when they were both apprentices, but after the battle in the ThunderClan camp, their interactions had turned hostile. Frostmask had figured it'd be like that from there on out. However... it seemed like she had won back some affection from the SkyClan warrior by helping her with Birdstrike.

Frostmask wanted to believe these friendly words were genuine, but she couldn't forget that Larchtail was also in the same Clan as Paledusk...

Slowly, Frostmask's tail began to swish thoughtfully. But, if Larchtail *was* being genuine, maybe she could help her. Maybe Larchtail knew information about Birdstrike that she could tell Frostmask.

After a beat of silence in which Frostmask said nothing, Larchtail continued.

"Did you get in trouble for it?" Larchtail said, her gaze flicking back up to Frostmask's.

Frostmask shook her head, finally acknowledging her.

"No. Sedgestar means it when he says don't attack elders," she said in a low voice. "And, uh— I'm Frostmask now, by the way."

Larchtail nodded, and Frostmask noticed that a bit of relief seemed to spark in the she-cat's eyes that Frostmask was willing to have a conversation with her.

"Frostmask, for your fur pattern. I like it. Congratulations, you definitely deserve your warrior name," she said, with a soft purr.

"Thank you," Frostmask said, dipping her head in acknowledgement before hesitating.

She knew she'd have to tread carefully to make sure she didn't shatter the fragile alliance hanging between the two of them.

Frostmask took a seat next to her, studying Larchtail's expression for any sign that she was going to overstep with her next few questions.

"...I was curious, though, about Birdstrike," Frostmask began hesitantly. "During the battle, she seemed to think that I was someone else... I just thought that was strange."

Larchtail gave a small sigh, shooting a sad glance over her shoulder, back at the elder.

"Yeah. Birdstrike's mind's not all there anymore. She regularly calls me 'Doepelt,'" Larchtail said. "That's my mother, by the way. We look similar. You probably resemble someone she once knew seasons and seasons ago."

Frostmask nodded, her heart hammering as she felt cold rush through her, but she kept her expression neutral. Even though she suspected as much, it was still powerful to hear Larchtail confirm it.

"Oh okay. There was this other really weird thing she said to me," Frostmask said, trying to keep her tone as causal as possible. "She was saying that she wasn't going to have her son taken from her. That she couldn't lose him."

Larchtail's expression became even more regretful.

"Oh, yeah... Slatewhisker," Larchtail said.

Frostmask blinked hard in surprise before her brow furrowed. She was suddenly off balance.

...Slatewhisker? Not Paledusk? Who in StarClan's name is Slatewhisker?

Larchtail seemed to notice the confusion of Frostmask's face, and she continued.

"Slatewhisker was one of Birdstrike's kits. And, my father actually," Larchtail muttered bitterly, glancing away from Frostmask for a moment. "But, I never met him. He disappeared from SkyClan territory over a moon before I was even born. No blood, no body. Just a scent-trail that led over the border, and he was gone. He and his brother, Paledusk, had been inseparable their whole lives up until that point, so Paledusk left SkyClan territory to look for him. But, Paledusk returned to the Clan alone."

Frostmask's ears pricked with interest, and she leaned in closer to Larchtail.

"Any idea what happened to him?" Frostmask asked, searching her face.

She saw a guarded look flash in Larchtail's eyes, but only for a moment.

"I guess there's no harm in telling you," she said with a forced purr. "It's seasons old gossip by now anyway. So, I told you all the facts already. The rest is just hearsay. You know how SkyClan borders the two-leg place?"

Frostmask nodded. Although she had never seen it for herself, it was something everyone learned during training. Two-legs were

dangerous, and all apprentices were warned to stay away from them.

"Well that means that we get a lot more stranger cats in our territory than any of the other clans," Larchtail continued. "Rogues, loners, and even the occasional brave kitty-pet, all coming from the two-leg place and across the scent markers into SkyClan land."

Frostmask's brow furrowed. It was an odd thought. The only cats she's seen her clan-mates ever worry about coming into ShadowClan territory were cats from other Clans.

I guess, besides me... and May.

"They aren't usually a problem," Larchtail said. "Our patrols can chase them off with ease. But, after Slatewhisker disappeared, these rumors started circulating in the Clan that some warriors had seen him having secret meetings with stranger cats at the two-leg place border. Becoming friends with them. Talking even with kitty-pets."

Larchtail crinkled her nose slightly.

"I think Paledusk went after Slatewhisker half because he missed him. And, half because he wanted to clear his family's tainted name."

Larchtail shook her head.

"Well, whether Slatewhisker ran off to be a kitty-pet or not, the end result was still the same. Paledusk came back empty-pawed, claiming that his brother was dead. And, Birdstrike was never the same. She retired to the elder's den soon after. She spent a lot of time with me and my littermates when I was a kit, and she was still pretty sharp mentally then. But, once I became an apprentice, that was around the time when she started getting more and more confused," Larchtail said with a sigh.

"Huh. That's sad," Frostmask muttered, her exterior calm while on the inside her mind reeled from all the information Larchtail told her.

...It finally all made sense! Paledusk must have met May in the two-

leg place while searching for his brother. But, he's ashamed of Slatewhisker, which was why he'd been so cagey about speaking to Frostmask about the situation.

Maybe May even knew Slatewhisker. Could she have been one of the cats that he had been rumored to have been meeting at the edge of SkyClan territory? Was that why Birdstrike seemed to blame May for taking her son away? And, why Paledusk seemed so aggressive towards Frostmask? Was that how May knew about the clans, and why she ultimately ended up bringing Frostmask to ShadowClan when she was unable to care for her—

Larchtail sighed, pulling Frostmask back out of her whirling thoughts.

"The worst part about Slatewhisker is just not knowing," Larchtail muttered, seemingly half to herself as she continued. "I mean, I can't really miss him since I never knew him. But, I'd like to know what happened. Was he really a traitor that ran away from SkyClan? Is he still alive? Or, is Paledusk right, and he's gone because he died somewhere out there? I guess I'll never know. If he is dead, he surely never had the proper death ceremony, so I won't even get to ask him in StarClan."

Frostmask slowly nodded along. Almost against her better judgement, she felt a twinge of empathy growing in her chest towards Larchtail. Now that she knew that Slatewhisker and May were somehow connected, she couldn't help but feel connected to Larchtail too. Really, their situations weren't all that different even. There would always be questions about May that Frostmask couldn't answer, just like Larchtail would always have questions about Slatewhisker...

At least Frostmask now had a solid explanation about how May knew Paledusk and Birdstrike, which brought her some peace. Although the understanding also brought up more questions than it answered.

"I actually feel the same way," Frostmask murmured, and she saw Larchtail's gaze widen in surprise. "Well, I mean about my mom. She died right after she brought me to ShadowClan. There are so

many things I'll never..."

Frostmask was interrupted as a yowl rang out through the clearing from one of the leaders on the Great Rock, signally the start of the Gathering. It was Willowstar who had yowled, and the grey tabby RiverClan leader was standing at the edge of the Great Rock, her silky fur shining silver in the moonlight.

"Let this leaf-fall Gathering begin!" Willowstar purred as quiet fell over the crowd. "I will start with RiverClan's announcements."

"All is well in RiverClan," she meowed. "The fish are still plentiful in the river despite the cooler weather. In the past moon, Otterfang was given her warrior name."

"Otterfang! Otterfang!" RiverClan cheered, and a few cats from the other clans joined in.

Frostmask's gaze found the sleek brown-furred she-cat in the crowd, and Otterfang raised her chin proudly. Frostmask's tail twitched as she remembered how much of an arrogant fur-ball Otterfang was the last time she saw her at a Gathering a few moons ago. Judging by the look of smug pride on the RiverClan warrior's face, that much hadn't changed.

"Besides that, we don't have that much else to report," Willowstar meowed, nodding to the other leaders, offering one of them to speak next.

Rabbitstar padded forward.

"WindClan is doing well too," the ginger tom said, raising his chin and tail proudly. "At the beginning of the moon, a fox had entered our territory and was hunting some of our rabbits, but my warriors managed to chase it off about a half moon ago before it could establish a den in our land. It headed in the direction of RiverClan territory."

At this, Rabbitstar nodded towards Willowstar, who narrowed her eyes at him.

"We have scented fox on our land recently," Willowstar said, a quiet

growl in her voice as her sharp gaze raked over Rabbitstar. "Thank you for warning us about it so *promptly."*

Although Willowstar's voice dripped with scorn, Rabbitstar seemed unbothered. He just nodded indulgently as if he took her thanks at face value.

"You're welcome. I figured it wouldn't be too much of a bother for RiverClan since foxes don't fish," Rabbitstar said with a cheeky purr. "I don't have anything else to report."

Morningstar rose to his paws quickly now, before Rabbitstar even had the chance to take a seat, as if he wanted to make sure he spoke before SkyClan did. Fennelstar watched him with a narrowed gaze, but he didn't try to rush to his paws. Morningstar strode to the front of the Great Rock, holding his plumy grey tail and head high.

"As I'm sure you are all aware," Morningstar said, his loud voice reverberating through the clearing. "ThunderClan and SkyClan have been waging war for moons now over some of *our* territory that SkyClan keeps trespassing and hunting in."

Fennelstar didn't say anything to argue with this statement, he simply watched Morningstar with a tense expression, although there were hisses and yowls of protest from the gathered SkyClan cats. Frostmask even heard Larchtail give a low growl from next to her.

"About a half moon ago, they struck us with a fox-hearted blow," Morningstar spat, lashing his tail and scraping his claws against the stone beneath him. "They attacked our camp while most of our warriors were out. They killed an elder, Mothwhisker, a nursing queen with young kits, Brambledapple, and my son, Rockstorm."

The ThunderClan cats yowled out in fury as Morningstar named their dead. Frostmask tensed her shoulders. Pressure was rising in the clearing like a storm was gathering. Frostmask glanced up towards the moon. It still shone brightly, but she knew that it wouldn't stay that way as soon as someone tried to attack someone else.

"However, with ShadowClan's help, we were able to drive them

back," Morningstar growled, continuing. "And, launch our own attack on their camp in revenge."

Morningstar turned to glare at Fennelstar. Both large toms still had wounds on their pelts, inflicted by each other's claws only a few nights ago.

"We are even now," Morningstar said to him, growling out each word. "Do not test us. Stay out of our territory, and we will leave you alone."

Fennelstar gave a mocking laugh, his narrowed eyes glinting dangerously.

"Forgive me, Morningstar," Fennelstar sneered. "But, I can't take a threat from you seriously, when your clan has to hide behind another, using them to do your dirty work. I wouldn't be surprised if ThunderClan and ShadowClan decide to just merge and become one soon enough."

"We would do no such thing!" Morningstar snarled furiously, and Sedgestar was suddenly on his paws, turning towards Fennelstar.

Sedgestar's long-legged form was slighter than the bulky SkyClan leader's, but with the fur down his back bristling and his amber eyes burning with anger, he looked no less intimidating.

"This past moon, ShadowClan also lost a good warrior, Swoopstrike, who fell at SkyClan's claws," Sedgestar said.

His voice was low and even, but it had an undertone of danger. It was like a dark river that appeared calm, but if a cat carelessly stuck even one paw in, they'd be snatched away by the vicious current surging just beneath the surface.

"It is true that we had an agreement with ThunderClan, but that treaty is now at its end," Sedgestar growled cooly. "ShadowClan does *no one's* dirty work for them, and we certainly aren't bound to ThunderClan. If you have an issue with ShadowClan, you take it up with me, and me alone, Fennelstar. Our Clans don't have to be enemies, but ShadowClan will put you in your place if we must."

Fennelstar's tail lashed behind him.

"Point taken, Sedgestar," Fennelstar growled, before his voice became sickly sweet. "In that case, besides this little— ahem— shall we say, *ThunderClan hiccup*, there have been so many good feelings between ShadowClan and SkyClan for many seasons... I am sorry for the loss of your warrior, but I think it'd be a shame to throw it all away because of this one little incident."

Sedgestar narrowed his eyes.

"Quite right," he growled, nodding in agreement.

Frostmask felt a surge of anger inside her, and she dug her claws into the ground. She knew that Sedgestar was allowing ShadowClan to hunt on SkyClan land, so all this talk about "good feelings" between ShadowClan and SkyClan was just for show. But, regardless, her blood still boiled to hear her leader agree with Fennelstar reducing the entirety of Swoopstrike's stolen life to "one little incident."

Sedgestar turned away from Fennelstar to look out over the gathered cats.

"As for the rest of our news, we have four new warriors, Pineshade, Frostmask, Poolcloud and Autumnleap," Sedgestar meowed.

Frostmask ducked her head slightly as ShadowClan cheered loudly and defiantly for their clan-mates with a scattering of ThunderClan cats joining in, but the rest of the clans were silent. Sedgestar turned back to Fennelstar.

"Do you have any more news, Fennelstar?" Sedgestar asked, icily polite.

Fennelstar shot a pointed look at Morningstar, and for a heartbeat, Frostmask wondered if he was actually going to respond to the proposed truce by the ThunderClan leader. But, then Fennelstar shook his head.

"No. SkyClan is doing well, but we don't have much to report," Fennelstar responded, his tail twitching.

"Then I say this Gathering is over," Sedgestar meowed.

Sedgestar smoothly descended from the Great Rock like water racing down the side of a stone.

Frostmask turned towards Larchtail to see she was already on her paws to leave.

"Bye Frostmask, it was really nice talking to you," she meowed. "I hope we get to see each other again soon."

Larchtail paused, grimacing as she seemed to replay her words in her head.

"Er... I mean, see you soon, at a Gathering. Off the battlefield, of course," she amended quickly, her tail twitching awkwardly.

Frostmask gave a snort of bitter amusement, but a bit to her surprise, she didn't feel any resentment towards Larchtail about it.

Larchtail's a good cat, Frostmask decided. *She can't help that she lives in a Clan run by Fennelstar and Paledusk.*

"Me too," Frostmask said, blinking at her in a friendly way. "Bye."

In the Air Tonight

It was an evening a little over a quarter moon after the Gathering when Frostmask padded up to the lichen covered entrance to the medicine cats' den, hesitating at the entrance to the small cave.

"Can I come in?" Frostmask called.

"Frostmask, is that you?" she heard Autumnleap's voice reply. "Thank StarClan, I'm boring my tail off in here."

"Yes, come in," Elmclaw's voice cut in.

Purring slightly, Frostmask pushed her way through the lichen and into the dark, cozy cave. Autumnleap was sitting up in his nest close to the entrance of the den. Elmclaw was sorting herbs farther towards the back, and Clearstream was not in the den. Autumnleap still had a few herbs plastered on his white belly fur, but his eyes were bright, and he was looking a lot stronger.

"How are you Elmclaw?" Frostmask asked, greeting him first, but padding over to Autumnleap.

"Alright. I'd be better if your den-mate here was being a better patient," Elmclaw said with a grunt, shooting Autumnleap a pointed look from his sharp green eyes. "Clearstream stuck me with him all evening while she's gathering some herbs for Dawntail and her kits. I'd much rather deal with those four little hellions than Autumnleap. I think I'm going to have to tie him to his nest."

"Hey! I'm right here you know," Autumnleap protested.

Frostmask purred, twitching an ear towards Autumnleap, but she continued to look at Elmclaw.

"Oh no! There isn't anything wrong with Dawntail or her kits, I

hope?" she asked.

"Oh there's plenty wrong with those kits, but nothing any herbs can do about it," Elmclaw said with a chuckle. "The herbs are for Dawntail. The kits had the bright idea to put some stinging nettles in the nest while their mother was sleeping. I think Buzzardkit and Cedarkit were trying to prank their sisters Cricketkit and Hollowkit, but the nettles all got on Dawntail instead. Clearstream's getting some herbs to sooth her stings."

"Stinging nettles?" Autumnleap echoed, wincing in sympathy. "I got into a patch of one of those once while hunting as an apprentice. It wasn't a good time. Those are some devious kits, huh?"

Frostmask nodded in agreement, turning to him.

"The nettles could've gotten on Snakeeyes or her kits too! Thank StarClan nothing like that happened to us while we were in the nursery," Frostmask meowed.

Autumnleap grimaced slightly.

"Well I might have tried once to put a thorn in Poolcloud's nest..." he confessed.

Frostmask's eyes widened.

"No way... was that that time when Amberberry stepped on a thorn inside the nursery?!" Frostmask said with a gasp. "Autumnleap, that was you!?"

Autumnleap nodded, his ears flattening guiltily. Frostmask shook her head, sighing in exasperation.

"But, that convinced Amberberry that the thorn bush was dropping them down into the nursery! She made us all help her prune the den for sunrises! My paws were aching for days after that," Frostmask said.

"But, I didn't want to get in trouble," Autumnleap said, widening his eyes imploringly at her, but a purr was building in his throat.

Frostmask rolled her eyes, reaching out a paw instinctively to playfully shove him, but she stopped before she made contact, her gaze flickering down to his bandaged stomach. She lowered her paw again without touching him.

"Fine. I guess I forgive you," she said, with a huff to pretend like she was still upset about it. "I guess it's moons old news anyway. How's your cut feeling?"

"Still hurts a little sometimes, but I'm getting a lot better," Autumnleap said, eagerly flexing his claws in and out.

"It would heal more quickly if you stayed still like I keep telling you instead of fidgeting all over the place," Elmclaw interrupted with a faint growl in his voice.

"I know. I know," Autumnleap said with an impatient sigh. "I'm just feeling so restless! I feel like I'm ready to go back to warrior's duties! Frostmask, have you gone hunting on SkyClan's territory yet?! I've been dying to, if only Elmclaw would let me out of this stupid den!"

"The cats in this stupid den saved your life," Elmclaw said, his green eyes sharp as he padded over to Autumnleap. "You could show a bit more gratitude."

Autumnleap sighed dramatically.

"But, is life really worth living if you have to spend it stuck in a nest all day?" he lamented.

Elmclaw chuckled then, shaking his head in exasperation.

"Fine. Let me take a look at that wound. If it's healed enough, I'll allow you some light hunting duties," he said.

Autumnleap gasped in excitement.

"Thank you, Elmclaw!" he said.

"Now hold still," Elmclaw meowed.

Autumnleap obeyed, not moving a whisker as Elmclaw removed the dried herbs from his belly. Frostmask peered over Elmclaw's dark tabby shoulder to watch. There was no scabbing on the cut, but the scar still looked very new and sensitive. It was a light red color, cutting a furrow through Autumnleap's long white fur. Elmclaw nodded slowly.

"Alright. You can go back to some light duties," Elmclaw said, and Frostmask saw Autumnleap perk up in delight. "But, that means only one hunt a day and don't push it if it starts to hurt. You can also sleep back in the warriors' den, but I want to come by the medicine cats' den at least once everyday so we can check on it. And, if you don't follow these instructions, you'll be back to being stuck in here with me before you can say 'mouse.' And, StarClan knows, neither of us want that, right?"

Autumnleap nodded vigorously.

"You're the best Elmclaw!" he declared, getting to his paws.

"I know," Elmclaw meowed, his voice a bit smug as he turned and padded back deeper into the cave to get back to his herbs.

Autumnleap turned to Frostmask, his amber eyes bright with excitement.

"Are you busy? Can we go hunting right now? It's close to sundown, right? Want to go to SkyClan territory?! It'll be so exciting!" Autumnleap meowed.

Frostmask purred at the sight of his enthusiasm.

"Slow down! You're talking as fast as Mosspaw," she said jokingly.

Autumnleap kneaded his paws eagerly into the ground.

"You just don't understand how boring being stuck in this den has been. I can't wait!" Autumnleap said with a purr.

Frostmask angled her ears towards the cave's exit.

"Let's get going then," she meowed. "I'd be happy to join you. But,

we have to go in patrols of three or more, remember? Should we see if Pineshade and Poolcloud want to come with?"

"Yes! Let's find them!" Autumnleap exclaimed, hurrying through the lichen covered cave entrance and leaving Frostmask to follow.

"You get Pineshade; I'll find Poolcloud?" Autumnleap asked over his shoulder.

"Sure," Frostmask meowed, and Autumnleap trotted off in search of his brother.

Frostmask glanced around the camp. The sun was setting, casting the clearing in orange light and long shadows. Frostmask spotted Pineshade's black pelt wreathed in darkness at the edge of the camp, where she was crouched over a puddle, lapping up some rain water. Frostmask starting padding in her direction, but she tensed as she saw Dampfang heading towards her too, and he reached Pineshade first.

"Hey Pineshade," Dampfang meowed to her. "I was wondering if you wanted to do something with me tonight? Like I don't know, um, a walk or a hunt or something?"

Pineshade lifted her head, twitching water off her whiskers as she started to walk away from him without responding.

"Sorry, can't. I'm *super* busy tonight," Pineshade said from over her shoulder, not giving him a second glance.

"But—" Dampfang began.

"Pineshade!" Frostmask said, waving her tail to catch her attention.

Pineshade's ears pricked, and she changed direction to walk up to Frostmask.

"Hey Frostmask, what's up?" Pineshade said, plopping down on the ground in front of her so she could lick her paw and swipe her whiskers clean, wiping the rest of the water away.

"Autumnleap is allowed to go back to some light duties," Frostmask

meowed. "We were wondering if you wanted to come hunting with us in SkyClan? Poolcloud might be joining us too."

Although she didn't even twitch an ear back towards Dampfang, Frostmask could see Pineshade's eyes drift back in his direction for just an instant.

"Yeah, I'm totally free tonight. No plans," Pineshade said cooly.

"Great," Frostmask meowed, her ears pricking as she heard Dampfang give a quiet hiss of annoyance.

Pineshade continued intently licking her paw, as if she was oblivious to it. Frostmask waited quietly until she saw Dampfang stalk away before she bent her head down towards Pineshade.

"I take it Dampfang is still trying to win back your favor?" Frostmask asked in a low voice.

"The frog-brain won't leave me alone," Pineshade hissed through her teeth. "All the time, it's 'Pineshade, let's patrol together,' and 'Pineshade, I brought you your favorite prey,' and 'Pineshade, I got you some soft nest feathers.' I keep giving him the cold shoulder, but StarClan! It's been exhausting."

"He won't take a hint," Frostmask said, giving a low growl of agreement.

Pineshade snorted.

"A hint? I thought when I yelled at him that was less of a subtle hint and more of a boulder to the face," she grumbled.

Frostmask's brow furrowed in concern as she looked at Pineshade.

"Do you want to talk to Sedgestar or Grovepelt? Tell them how Dampfang keeps bothering you?" Frostmask asked. "They could tell him to stop."

Pineshade flicked her tail dismissively.

"I don't want to get them involved," Pineshade said. "Dampfang's

annoying, but he's harmless."

Frostmask just twitched her ears.

"Hey!" Autumnleap's voice called.

He and Poolcloud were bounding over to them.

"Poolcloud's coming with us!" Autumnleap meowed excitedly.

"Yeah, well I was planning on going hunting with Dewleaf tonight. But, Autumnleap played the 'I almost died less than a moon ago' move against me, and I couldn't say no," Poolcloud joked, his tail twitching.

"Aw, come on! Don't you think it'll be so fun?" Autumnleap said, twining around the three of them. "Just the four of us, like old times!"

"Gross. Don't touch me," Pineshade sniffed, batting his auburn tail away when it brushed her back.

"Classic Pineshade! That's the spirit!" Autumnleap purred, looking like even his sister would be unable to put a damper on his bright mood tonight.

"I already let Grovepelt know that we were planning on hunting in SkyClan," he continued excitedly. "Let's get going! It'll be fully dark by the time we get to the border."

"Alright, alright," Poolcloud said with a good natured purr. "Keep your fur on, we're coming."

"Race you to the tunnel entrance," Pineshade meowed quickly, on her paws in a flash and haring towards the camp exit.

"Last one there's a slow-slug!" she taunted from over her shoulder as she disappeared into the thorn tunnel.

"No fair!" Poolcloud yowled as he ran after her, laughing.

Autumnleap lunged forward with an eager purr, but Frostmask

leapt in front of him to block him, her belly suddenly tightening with worry.

"Wait, Autumnleap!" she said, searching his gaze with hers. "Shouldn't you take it easy? You're still healing, remember?"

Autumnleap blinked, then touched his tail to her shoulder reassuringly.

"I appreciate your concern, but I feel fine," he meowed. "I don't think a little running will be a problem."

"But, Elmclaw only said *light* duties," Frostmask protested, her brow furrowed.

Autumnleap glanced away from her like he was only half listening. His ears were twitching as if he was itching with impatience to get out of camp.

"I promise if it starts hurting, I'll stop, okay?" Autumnleap said, brushing around her and heading towards the tunnel. "Now we better get going or we'll never hear the end of how slow we are from Pineshade!"

"I— okay," Frostmask muttered as Autumnleap ducked into the tunnel and dashed off.

Frostmask sighed lightly, then ran off after him.

Once they had all made it to the tunnel entrance, and Frostmask verified that Autumnleap was still standing on all four paws, some of her worry about him started to evaporate and anticipation about the coming hunt on SkyClan set in.

Frostmask narrowed her eyes as Pineshade led the way into the pitch back tunnel. Desire to steal from SkyClan pricked like claws down her spine. It was a little retribution, but it was something.

She hadn't had the chance to go hunting there yet, having been busy with other patrols the past few nights. And, now as she found herself padding closer and closer to SkyClan territory with each step, she found a mixture of eagerness and nervousness swirling in

her belly; even though she knew that she was following explicit instructions from Sedgestar to the letter, trespassing on enemy territory without going there to battle them still felt a bit strange and taboo.

But, she had Pineshade, Poolcloud and Autumnleap with her, and Frostmask wouldn't have chosen any other cats to be with her on this mission in enemy territory. She knew these three inside and out. All of the training sessions they'd spent together during their apprenticeship meant that when they all worked together, they almost stopped being four cats, instead turning into one.

They moved quietly through the tunnel, communicating simple thoughts mostly through tail-signals and light touches. The sign-speak that Lizardkit and his family had developed had become more prevalent throughout ShadowClan. It was slowly being implemented as something that was taught during apprentice training, and warriors had started to use it to convey more complex ideas to each other in situations where they needed to be silent.

Pineshade used one of the signals now to halt the group behind her with a wave of her tail. The tunnel in front of Frostmask had become slightly illuminated as a bit of dim, grey light streamed in through the exit ahead, and Frostmask was able to make out Pineshade's and Autumnleap's silhouettes in front of her. Pineshade approached the entrance to the tunnel, warily poking her head out of the tunnel to make sure the coast was clear.

Pineshade signaled the group forward, indicating they could head out.

The four of them streamed out of the tunnel, silently bounding through the small stretch of ThunderClan territory between the tunnel exit and the neutral territory around Fourtrees. Frostmask could barely make out the stale scents from the Gathering several nights ago still clinging to the bushes there, but there were no fresh scents. Frostmask relaxed as their paws crossed over the ThunderClan border and into Fourtrees.

"Let's find something to disguise our scents with," Pineshade meowed in a low voice, and the group split up to investigate the

bushes.

They hadn't gone with their standard mask of toadstools because SkyClan territory was less damp than ShadowClan's, and it would seem out of place to any SkyClan cat that happened upon it. Frostmask scented the air for strong plant smells, and her nose led her to a big patch of chamomile. Frostmask signaled to the others with her tail.

"This'll work!" she said in a loud whisper.

Frostmask rolled in it first, and the rest of them followed.

"Nothing to see here, SkyClan. Just a big, wandering patch of chamomile," Autumnleap said with a soft purr.

"Are we ready?" Poolcloud asked, his fluffy black-and-white coat prickling in anticipation and his amber eyes gleaming.

Frostmask flicked her tail eagerly. Pineshade nodded, her pelt bristling with excitement.

"By the time SkyClan wakes up, their entire territory will be emptied of prey!" Autumnleap declared, flexing his claws in and out.

They prowled off, heading in the direction of SkyClan territory. Without having to say anything, they fell into their normal positions. Pineshade was on point, leading the group. Frostmask and Autumnleap were walking side by side behind her, on alert for any disturbances in the environment around them, and strong Poolcloud was behind them, guarding their backs.

Frostmask also kept a half an eye on Autumnleap as they walked, staying on alert for any sign of limping from him. If he started looking like his wounds were bothering him too much, Frostmask would turn this whole patrol around and lead them back to ShadowClan camp. Autumnleap would argue up a storm against it, but she knew Pineshade and Poolcloud would be on her side.

Autumnleap seemed like he was doing fine at the moment, however. He was moving smoothly and his eyes were bright as he

looked around at the unfamiliar forest. They crossed into SkyClan territory, and almost immediately they came across a stream that blocked their path. Frostmask glanced from left to right. There was no way to go around it. If they went left, they'd end up back in ThunderClan territory, if they went right, they would be heading towards RiverClan. Frostmask gazed back forward at the water, her paws prickling in fear. She dearly hoped that they wouldn't have to swim through it...

"Let's look for a place to cross," Pineshade murmured. "If we swim, it'll wash off the chamomile scent."

Frostmask nodded in agreement, feeling a rush of relief that she wouldn't have to get her paws wet. They padded upstream, and just before the river split, creating a Y that encircled RiverClan territory, they came across some stepping stones into SkyClan territory. Pineshade crossed first, and Frostmask followed her. She went slowly to keep her balance on the slippery stones, her claws unsheathed for better grip, but she made it across without incident. Frostmask felt a prickle of worry for Autumnleap as she she turned to watch him cross, but he made it over fine, as did Poolcloud.

"Which way should we go?" Autumnleap asked in a whisper, his tail twitching as they gazed out at the dark forest unfurling before them.

"Why don't we stick to the bank of the river?" Frostmask suggested in an equally hushed voice. "We're not that familiar with the territory, so it'll be easier if we use a landmark that can bring us back here when it's time to go home."

"Good idea," Pineshade said softly, signaling them forward.

The whole group was tense as they padded up the river. Frostmask's ears were constantly pricked, and they swiveled towards every little noise, in case it was a SkyClan warrior. But, the only living creatures she identified were two mice, hiding among fallen leaves at the base of an oak tree. Frostmask touched Autumnleap's flank with her tail, nodding towards the tree. They slunk towards the mice side by side, leaving Pineshade and Poolcloud to wait by the river. As they got within striking distance, Frostmask read the

tenseness of Autumnleap's muscles as he prepared to pounce, and they leapt together. Frostmask's paws smacked squarely down on the back of one mouse, before she dipped her head, killing it with a bite. When Frostmask lifted her head back up, she saw that the other mouse was already dangling from Autumnleap's jaws, and his eyes were shining in the starlight as he gazed at her.

Our first catch on SkyClan territory!

Frostmask nodded at Autumnleap, warm satisfaction in her chest. She swiped her tongue over her lips. The blood from her enemy's food seemed to taste sweeter than what she was used to.

They scraped some dirt over their prey to stash it for pick it up on their way back, and they continued upstream. It wasn't long before they came across more prey. Pineshade snagged a blackbird, and Poolcloud snatched up a water vole that had darted across their path.

As they walked longer with no signs of SkyClan warriors, a slight feeling of relaxation began to creep over the group. Frostmask wasn't jumping at every little sound, and they started to even hold conversations with each other in hushed voices.

"Oh! Look at that! What are those?" Poolcloud said, flicking towards the river with his tail.

The river had gotten wider the farther they traveled into SkyClan land, and Poolcloud was pointing at a large mass right in the middle of it. Frostmask blinked, trying to make sense of the shadowy shapes.

"It's like a little island?" Autumnleap meowed.

"Yeah," Pineshade said, squinting at it. "It looks like a bunch of big rocks. Boulders."

Frostmask sniffed the air. She could tell by the strength of RiverClan scent on the breeze that the large stones were a place frequently visited by the RiverClan cats, but she couldn't figure out what exactly was so appealing about them.

"Huh," Frostmask said curiously. "Maybe RiverClan uses them as a fishing spot?"

Pineshade shrugged.

"The behavior of those fish-faces barely makes sense even in the best of circumstances," she said. "So, there's really no way to guess."

The rest of them purred at the comment and kept padding on.

"Squirrel scent ahead!" Pineshade whispered, perking up. "I'm going after it."

She flicked her tail at Poolcloud to signal him over to her.

"Come with. Let's circle it," she said.

"You got it, Pinestar ma'am" Poolcloud said with a sarcastic purr, heading after her.

Pineshade just rolled her eyes.

"Be right back," Poolcloud said to Frostmask and Autumnleap.

"We'll just keep heading up the river," Autumnleap said. "Catch up with us when you get it."

Poolcloud flicked an ear to let them know that he heard as he and Pineshade vanished into the dark undergrowth. Frostmask and Autumnleap kept walking on.

"Are you having fun?" Autumnleap asked with a purr, as they weaved around the bushes at the edge of the river.

"Hm. It's definitely exciting. Although a bit hard to concentration on hunting when you have to worry about being hunted yourself," Frostmask said, flicking her tail.

Autumnleap eyes sparkled with amusement.

"You worry too much," he said, flicking her side with his tail.

"No. You entirely don't worry enough," Frostmask shot back with a

soft purr.

Frostmask's gaze studied the dark territory around them. Despite the undercurrent of constant concern that an enemy might appear at any time, she was still able to find the forest pretty. Even though it was dark, she could still make out the orange, gold, and red, leaf-fall colored foliage above her.

"It is interesting to see the other Clans' territories, though," Frostmask added. "Like, we're getting this glimpse into how the other cats live."

Autumnleap's ears pricked.

"You're right," he meowed. "While we're here, we should get the whole SkyClan experience! Which means..."

Autumnleap ran over to a large, nearby maple tree. He reared up, dug his claws into the bark, and bounded up the tree to sit on a low branch. Frostmask's eyes widened.

"Autumnleap! What are you doing?" Frostmask hissed in a scolding voice as she trotted over to the base of the tree.

He blinked laughing amber eyes down at her.

"Getting the full SkyClan cat experience, clearly!" he purred. "The bird-brains practically live in the trees!"

"You shouldn't be climbing!" Frostmask protested, her tail lashing as she glared up at him. "You could tear you wounds back open! And, make yourself fall because you hurt yourself! *Or,* you could lose your balance, fall, and hurt yourself from that! Also climbing is so noisy with all the leaf rustling. We're supposed to be being quiet; what if someone hears you?"

"I'll be fine, Frostmask," he reassured.

Frostmask just narrowed her eyes at him, jutting out her chin. Autumnleap tilted his head at her, not so easily cowed.

"Alright, fine. But, if you want me to come down, you'll have to

come up here and make me," he said, his tail playfully flicking as it hung down from the branch under him.

Frostmask huffed, still glaring at him. Autumnleap arched a brow at her but stubbornly held his ground, an infuriating look of amusement on his face.

"Stupid, frog-brained, idiotic toms!" Frostmask grumbled under her breath.

"What was that?" Autumnleap asked in a sweet, innocent voice.

"I said, I'm coming," Frostmask said, rearing back to sink her foreclaws into the bark. "But, if you hurt yourself by playing around in this tree, I'll claw you up twice as badly for being a frog-brain!"

Frostmask bounded up the tree easily as Autumnleap laughed.

"You sound just like Swoopstrike," Autumnleap purred as Frostmask reached his branch and sat beside him.

She furrowed her brow at him.

"Good. Unlike you, Swoopstrike had sense," she grumbled, twitching her tail.

Autumnleap took in her stony expression for a moment before leaning over to gently bump his head against hers.

"Alright" he conceded with a quiet purr. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to rile you so much. I just thought it would be fun to run around and climb some trees after having been stuck in the medicine cats' den for days."

Frostmask pulled her head away so she could search his gaze with hers.

"Can't you see I just don't want you getting hurt!" she meowed, her eyes wide. "You were so injured not that long ago, and I just can't stop thinking about how after the battle, when Swoopstrike was dead, and you were *just lying there*, limp and bleeding—"

Frostmask's voice suddenly choked up, and she paused, blinking hard a few times as grief and pain unexpectedly rushed over her. Autumnleap gazed at her quietly, his face sympathetic as he waited for her to continue. Frostmask sunk her claws into the branch to steady herself as her legs began to shake.

"You're my best friend," Frostmask meowed, her voice quavering as she spoke around the lump in her throat. "And, I'd just lost Swoopstrike, and all I could think about was how I wouldn't make it if you died too. I couldn't lose you too. I couldn't. *I can't,* Autumnleap."

"Shh, it's okay," he murmured, scooting over to her so he could wrap his tail around her.

Frostmask leaned her head against his shoulder, taking a deep, trembling breath as his supportive presence against her side helped soothe her.

"I'm really glad you're okay. But, I'm just still so scared," Frostmask whispered. "Swoopstrike was taken so suddenly, and I keep thinking about how anything, at anytime, could—"

"I'm not going anywhere, Frostmask," Autumnleap said in a low voice as his tail tightened around her, not even letting her finish the thought.

"You don't know that," Frostmask whispered.

Autumnleap didn't respond. Silence hung between them for a few moments as Frostmask stared out at the dark river in front of them.

It was pitch black and she saw little pinpricks of stars reflecting in it, like she was staring down at the sky. Frostmask imagined herself plunging into the water, swimming with the stars swirling around her and seeing Swoopstrike emerge from the depths, his silver and black pelt studded with shining dots of light as he paddled over to greet her.

Frostmask shook her ears. If only visiting StarClan could be that easy...

"Maybe that's true," Autumnleap whispered, finally replying. "But, I'd never want to leave you, Frostmask."

Frostmask shook her head.

"That doesn't matter. No-one wants to leave anyone. But, it happens anyway. We don't have a choice," Frostmask said bitterly.

She lifted her head from his shoulder, so she could glance over at him. He was staring at her with a pained look in his amber eyes. Frostmask closed her eyes for a moment and sighed.

"Now I've just made you upset," she muttered bitterly, opening her eyes and looking away from him. "There's no point in talking about it anyway. There's nothing that either of us can do to control it. I'm sorry. It's stupid. I shouldn't have brought it up."

Autumnleap gazed at her in dismay.

"No! It's not stupid," Autumnleap protested. "And, you can always talk to me about anything you want to."

He leaned over to touch his muzzle to her cheek, but Frostmask moved away from his touch with a sigh, gently disentangling herself from his tail.

"Frostmask—" Autumnleap said, his amber eyes still troubled as he stared at her.

"There you guys are!" Poolcloud's quiet voice drifted up from where he and Pineshade had appeared at the base of the tree.

Pineshade was scowling up at the two of them.

"What are you frog-brains doing up there?" she hissed. "Leaf rustling is so noisy. You'll attract SkyClan attention."

Frostmask angled an ear towards Autumnleap, shooting him a pointed look. Autumnleap gave a sharp sigh and closed his eyes for a moment, like he was searching for a scrap of patience inside him.

"Okay. Okay, I get it. Climbing a tree is a frog-brained idea. We're

coming down now, alright?" he said his voice a bit annoyed.

Frostmask descended first and watched Autumnleap carefully as he came down afterwards.

"Seriously. StarClan," Pineshade said, her tail twitching as he walked past her. "I can't leave you alone for like five heartbeats—"

"Put a mouse in it Pineshade. I'm not in the mood," Autumnleap growled at her from over his shoulder, his tail twitching.

Pineshade widened her eyes in offense and took a threatening step towards him. Frostmask warily watched on, her tail twitching with anxiety. She knew where this was going.

"Guys," Poolcloud whispered, his brow furrowed as he put himself between Autumnleap and Pineshade, trying to break it up.

"Oh, *I'm sorry!* I guess I should just let you start yowling 'Hey, SkyClan! We're right here!' then?" Pineshade spat at Autumnleap from over Poolcloud's back.

"Guys, enough..." Poolcloud said, a quiet growl in his voice and his gaze flickering around the forest nervously.

Autumnleap curled his lip back at Pineshade.

"You're always like this!" he said, his voice rising slightly in anger. "Thinking you know better than—!"

Poolcloud slapped his fluffy tail against Autumnleap's mouth.

"Shh!" Poolcloud hissed in a whisper while he glared at his siblings. *"Shut up frog-brains! I think I heard something!"*

Frostmask immediately tensed. Her ears pricked, and she raised her nose to the breeze. The four of them were suddenly standing in wide-eyed silence, nothing but the sound of a gentle wind through the forest. Poolcloud slowly moved his tail out of Autumnleap's face, and even as Autumnleap brushed the long black and white hairs out of his mouth with a paw, he continued to be wide-eyed, his ears twitching and swiveling towards every little whisper in the

woods.

Frostmask blinked. There it was. The faint sound of paws crunching on fallen leaves. It was growing louder. Heading in their direction.

Pineshade signaled to them frantically with her paw.

'Hide!' she signed.

Frostmask felt her training take over as the four of them scattered. Frostmask's paw-steps were light and silent across the forest floor, instinctively weaving around noisy leaves and twigs while her gaze flashed from place to place for somewhere to hide. Her ears pricked as she noticed a hollow in a gap between some roots of a nearby tree, and she squeezed inside. She crouched down, hidden by the shadows of the roots, and turned so she could peer back out.

The paw-steps were getting louder, and it wasn't long before, in the distance, she saw flickers of a white pelt through the undergrowth, which starkly stood out against the backdrop of the dark forest. It was both too dark out and the cat too hidden by undergrowth for her to identify, but she saw him pad up to the river, where he took a seat on the bank.

Frostmask let out a soft sigh of relief that the cat didn't seem to have noticed her or her friends hiding in the forest nearby. But, as the moments began to stretch on and on, and Frostmask stayed crouched in the roots, her tail began to twitch with anxiety. The cat showed no sign of moving. She and the rest would be trapped for as long as the tom stayed there... What if they wouldn't be able to get back home before the sun rose?

Frostmask was pulled out of her anxious thoughts at the sound of splashing. She saw a dark form moving through the river, swimming up to the SkyClan cat that was waiting for it. The dark cat emerged from the water, giving his pelt a shake and walking up to the white cat.

"Hello," the dark cat meowed.

Frostmask's brow furrowed. She didn't recognize this cat's voice.

"You're late," the white cat growled, and Frostmask stiffened as a voice she *did* recognize, Paledusk's, grumbled in her ears.

Frostmask couldn't make out the dark tom's expression, but he seemed unconcerned in the face of Paledusk's anger based on his relaxed body language.

"Why did you ask to meet?" Paledusk continued, his voice impatient. "What does Willowstar want this time?"

"She's not pleased," the tom responded. "She was expecting us to have access to the hunting grounds on this side of the river come leaf-bare. But, you refuse to give it to us, since you failed to secure ThunderClan territory for yourselves."

"Well Perchpelt, tell Willowstar that if she had given us some RiverClan warriors to help us, we would both have new territory," Paledusk snarled. "She can't expect to always lie around and have other cats do her work for her."

Frostmask's eyes widened.

Perchpelt! RiverClan's deputy...

"We *will* control both sides of the river before the winter solstice," Perchpelt said, stating the words coolly like it was a definite fact.

Frostmask could barely make out Paledusk's lashing tail through the undergrowth as he sized up the RiverClan tom.

"Is that a threat!?" Paledusk spat.

"Calm yourself, Paledusk," Perchpelt said, giving a dismissive tail-flick. "Willowstar understands now that she can't leave Fennelstar to his own devices. She wants to meet with him. I am sure she will have our warriors play a more active role going forward..."

"How *dare* you just waltz onto my land and threaten us!"

Paledusk was on his paws now, hissing and snarling furiously.

"SkyClan doesn't need you! Take your fish-stinking pelt off of my

territory!" Paledusk roared.

"Careful, Paledusk," Perchpelt warned in a low voice, not moving a muscle despite the large, bristling tom before him. "Think about it before you do something rash. We know about the two-legs. They're destroying more of the forest this season, aren't they? And, frightening the prey off? We can hear their monsters from across the river... SkyClan does need us. This riverbank in exchange for RiverClan's help in securing you more land is more than a fair trade. After all, it's poor hunting here for cats that don't fish. You need more territory, and you clearly aren't strong enough to take it alone, or you would've already succeeded. Do you really want to starve this leaf-bare?"

Paledusk didn't respond besides giving a low growl. Perchpelt got to his paws to leave.

"Tell Fennelstar what I said," Perchpelt meowed over his shoulder. "And, give me his response, so we can arrange a meeting."

Perchpelt slipped back into the water and swam off. Paledusk turned on his heel and stalked away from the river, vanishing back into the woods. After the sound of his paw-steps faded in her ears, Frostmask still waited for several heartbeats longer to make sure Paledusk was truly gone before she emerged from her hiding spot. Her chest was tight with anger at the sight of him, but drowning that out was worry for her friends; that they had safely hidden and were okay.

She crept warily through the trees back to where she last saw her clan-mates, her gaze flickering around for them.

"Autumnleap? Pineshade? Poolcloud?" she called in a cautious whisper.

"Frostmask," Poolcloud's voice hissed.

Frostmask's ears pricked and she turned to see him brushing out of some undergrowth. Gratitude rushed through her at the sight of his face, and she hurried over to him. Poolcloud blinked at her in relief, seeming equally grateful that Frostmask hadn't been caught.

"Where are Autumnleap and Pineshade?" Frostmask asked.

"Over here," Autumnleap's voice grumbled.

Frostmask turned towards his voice to see twin pairs of amber eyes staring out from under the same bramble thicket. As Autumnleap and Pineshade tried to emerge from the bush, they shoved at each other, both of them trying to get out from the thorny, densely woven tendrils first. Pineshade finally squeezed free of the thorns, sighing in relief as she straightened and shook out her dark coat, and Autumnleap shoved his way out behind her.

Autumnleap glared at Pineshade as he flicked his tail.

"She shoved me under there, and I had to spend the whole time sitting on thorns!" he hissed in a low voice.

"You're welcome for saving your mangy pelt!" Pineshade hissed back, whirling on him. "News flash: it wasn't a blast for me either. You were standing on my tail the whole time!"

"You two are unbearable," Poolcloud groaned, interrupting their bickering. "Get over it! We have more important things to discuss. Didn't you hear those cats talking?!"

Pineshade and Autumnleap both shook their heads.

"We heard voices, but we were too far away to make out their words," Pineshade meowed.

"Besides, I couldn't concentrate because of all the thorns stabbing me," Autumnleap grumbled.

"I heard them," Frostmask said, stepping forward. "It was SkyClan and RiverClan's deputies meeting."

Poolcloud nodded.

"Morningstar was right when he came to our camp all those moons ago. Those Clans do have an alliance," he meowed. "We need to let Sedgestar know what we found out."

Pineshade twitched her tail.

"Is it urgent?" she meowed. "Should we go back to camp now?"

Frostmask shook her head.

"I think we can finish our hunt," she said. "We should just report back to Sedgestar when we get home."

"Alright," Pineshade meowed, before turning to Autumnleap to blink at him with exaggerated concern. "Is that good for you? Or, does poor Autumnleap need to rest to lick his little thorn scratches?"

"I'm fine," Autumnleap snarled, brushing past her. "Let's get back to hunting."

Pineshade rolled her eyes, but didn't taunt him any more, instead flicking her tail to gather Frostmask and Poolcloud to her, and the four of them set off again. Frostmask bounded forward to catch up with Autumnleap, but he didn't look at her when she walked at his shoulder.

"Hey," she murmured. "You okay? I'm sorry Pineshade's treading on your tail. If you've still got thorns tangled in your pelt, I can—"

"Stop treating me like a *dumb kit,* Frostmask!" Autumnleap snapped, glaring at her. "I'm fine, and I can take care of myself! You said it yourself just earlier that no one has control over what injuries or deaths happen. So, why do you *still* keep worrying about me!?"

Frostmask's eyes went wide. Her muscles tight, she stared at him in shock for several moments before blinking hard. After a heartbeat, a look of guilt crept across Autumnleap's face as he took in her expression. He opened his mouth to say something, but Frostmask took off before he could, her paws flying through the unfamiliar forest.

"Frostmask, wait!" Autumnleap said from behind her.

"What did you say to her?!" Pineshade snarled accusatively at Autumnleap, coming to Frostmask's defense.

"I'm sorry!" Autumnleap called after Frostmask.

Frostmask felt her eyes sting, and she swallowed around the lump in her throat as she kept running. But, she was in enemy territory, and she didn't know where she was going, so sense set back in after not too long, and she slowed, panting by the river bank. She padded over to the river's edge to lap up and few mouthfuls of cool water as she tried to calm her trembling paws, when she heard footsteps behind her. She whipped around to see Autumnleap running up to her, slowing as he got closer. Frostmask still felt the sting of his words as she arched her back at him defensively.

"Leave me alone," she said with a quiet growl.

Autumnleap's eyes shone with shame and apology.

"I'm sorry Frostmask," he meowed. "I shouldn't have said that. Pineshade's just been driving me crazy, and I was frustrated, and I snapped at you when I shouldn't have. I'm *really* sorry. I shouldn't've yelled like that."

Frostmask defiantly turned her gaze away from him, hurt and sadness still swirling in her belly.

"But, you're right, aren't you?" she growled down at the ground. "I shouldn't be so worried about you."

Autumnleap let out a huff that sounded mildly amused.

"You are maybe being *a bit* overprotective," he admitted. "But, you being worried about me doesn't actually bother me. Because I know that the reason you worry about me is because you care."

He padded a bit closer to her.

"I know you think I don't worry enough, and I'm not careful enough. But, I do worry about you too, you know? A lot actually," he meowed softly.

Frostmask felt a rush of hot pain and anger as she dug her claws into the ground and brought her gaze back up to his.

"That's the problem!" she growled, her tail lashing.

Autumnleap's brow furrowed.

"Worrying about you?" he asked.

"No!" Frostmask cried, clenching her fangs. "Caring in general! Everyone is just going to die. Why bother? Why should someone bother getting attached to cats that are just going to leave them..."

Frostmask hung her head defeatedly, the bright anger inside her fading to be replaced with hollow, aching emptiness.

"Leave *me*," she muttered bitterly to the ground.

She took a seat, wrapping her tail around herself for comfort. She heard Autumnleap's paw-steps on the stony river bank as he walked over to her side.

"And, don't you *dare* say you'll never leave me, because you know you can't promise that," Frostmask muttered to the ground as he sat next to her.

Autumnleap purred very faintly.

"Okay, I won't," he murmured.

For a moment they just stayed there in silence as Frostmask intently studied the pebbly ground under her feet.

"You know, I think I've heard the elders say before that 'it's better to have loved and lost than never loved at all,'" Autumnleap murmured.

Frostmask glanced over at him, and she saw he was gazing up towards the stars. The pinpricks of light reflected back in his dark amber eyes.

"That's easy for them to say when they know that they'll get to see all their friends and family in StarClan one day," Frostmask muttered bitterly.

Autumnleap glanced down at her in surprise.

"Do you not believe that?" he asked.

Frostmask shrugged.

"I believe that StarClan exists. But, it's just for Clan cats, right?" she muttered. "My mom won't be there..."

She looked back down at her paws as she swallowed hard.

"I don't even know if one day, will... Will I go there?" she rasped, feeling raw as she finally said the fear out loud.

"Of course!" Autumnleap said with a small gasp. "If our ancestors have any scrap of fairness in them, you, and your mother, will be with them too."

Autumnleap bent his head to nudge her cheek with his muzzle.

"And, if you aren't..." he said in a rough whisper. "Then I will leave their hunting grounds and search all the skies and the earth until I find you. You won't be alone."

There was a powerful emotion in his voice that Frostmask couldn't quite identify. She lifted her gaze to look at him, and when she gazed into the amber eyes that were so familiar to her, her chest tightened in a strange way. She had an odd sense that she was looking at him, *really* looking at him, for the first time. His eyes were open, raw, and vulnerable as they searched hers.

"Frostmask... I- I—" Autumnleap stammered.

"Hey! Autumnleap, did you say you're sorry?!" Pineshade's voice interrupted him.

Autumnleap blinked and shook himself like there had been a spell over him which suddenly shattered. Frostmask too jerked and took a deep breath, as if she had been underwater and her head had just broke back through the surface. Still, the fur down her back prickled with energy and tension as she turned to look at Pineshade and Poolcloud padding up to them.

"Uh— Yeah- yeah," Frostmask stuttered, shaking her ears as she tried to shake off the weird feeling. "He did. It's okay."

Pineshade nodded.

"Good," she said, shooting Autumnleap a sharp look.

But, it seemed like it hardly registered for the dark ginger warrior. He was still looking at Frostmask and blinking a foggy look out of his eyes.

"Well, Poolcloud and I grabbed a couple of birds on our way here, but I was thinking we should probably head back towards Fourtrees," Pineshade continued. "We still have time to hunt on the way back, but the night's getting on, and we have to make sure we're back by sunrise, right?"

"Right," Frostmask echoed, getting to her paws and taking a step after her as Pineshade and Poolcloud began to pad back the way they came.

Frostmask blinked and turned back to Autumnleap when she realized he was still sitting by the river.

"You coming?" she asked.

Autumnleap shook his pelt.

"Yeah, of course," he mumbled, getting to his paws and following the rest of them.

It was still before dawn by the time they made it back to camp with their prey. They had managed to double their haul on their way back to the stepping stones, so it was still a good amount of fresh-kill despite the fact they had lost time hiding from Paledusk and the RiverClan deputy.

As Frostmask reflected back on the conversation she overheard between them, she remembered Perchpelt mentioning that the hunting was poor close to the riverbank.

We'll go deeper into their territory next time.

Frostmask had also noticed Autumnleap seemed a bit broody for the rest of the hunt, but she didn't think he seemed to be in pain. So, she did her best to brush his mood off, although the fur down her back rose again with a shiver when she remembered the strange feeling she had staring into his dark amber eyes.

"I'll let Sedgestar know we're back and about the conversation we heard," Poolcloud muttered around the prey in his mouth as they walked through the thorn tunnel into the camp.

They headed over to the fresh-kill pile to drop their prey off, and Poolcloud went over to Sedgestar's den.

Frostmask sighed softly. She was looking forward to napping in her nest before dawn, but as she, Pineshade, and Autumnleap turned towards the warriors' den, a dark shadow detached itself from near the bush and padded up to them. Frostmask narrowed her eyes as she recognized Dampfang, but he ignored her and Autumnleap, heading straight for Pineshade. Pineshade shot Frostmask a look that said *not this again* before she turned to Dampfang.

"Pineshade—" Dampfang began.

"Dampfang. Enough," Pineshade meowed firmly but quietly before he could continue. "You have to stop doing this. I don't want to hang out with you, okay? You have to stop bothering me."

Dampfang kneaded his claws into the ground.

"Okay, yeah, I get it," he mumbled. "But, please, give me just one more chance. Just *one* time, I promise. Let's go for a walk so we can talk privately, and after that, if you never want to see my face again, I'll leave you alone forever."

Pineshade was silent for a long moment. Frostmask felt the fur on her shoulder stir as Autumnleap padded closer to her side as he also waited to see what Pineshade would say.

Finally, Pineshade gave a curt nod.

"Alright. I'll come," she meowed.

"Thank you," Dampfang said, and Frostmask felt a bit surprised to hear what sounded like real relief in his voice.

"See you guys later," Pineshade said to Autumnleap and Frostmask as she followed Dampfang out of camp.

Autumnleap gave a quiet, discontented growl as Pineshade's black tail disappeared into the tunnel.

"Nothing but trouble will come from that," he grumbled.

"I don't think Pineshade's that frog-brained," Frostmask said in her defense.

Autumnleap snorted, seeming unconvinced.

"Pineshade's been in love with him for a long time," Autumnleap muttered darkly. "And, feelings like that can't be shaken off like rain water. They stick on you."

"You sound a bit bitter, Autumnleap. Are you speaking from experience?" Frostmask said, the quip coming out of her mouth without her thinking about it.

But, she felt a pang of regret about it immediately, which grew only stronger when she glanced over at Autumnleap and saw him looking at her in surprise. Her pelt suddenly flushed with heat, and she wished she could snatch the words back.

"I- er... bad joke," Frostmask muttered quickly, her ears burning as she turned away from him.

"Well maybe *I am*," Autumnleap said, and Frostmask was relieved that his voice contained only his normal cheerfulness and teasing, no weird emotions. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Another time. I think I've had enough drama for one night," Frostmask said drily over her shoulder as she padded towards the warriors' den. "Right now, my nest is calling my name much more strongly than anything else. Come on, I'll show you where yours is."

Herding Kittens

Frostmask stretched in the leaf-fall midday sunlight, flinching slightly as a cold breeze suddenly nipped at her nose, but she was thankful her thick pelt insulated her, keeping most of her body cozy. She settled back down on the sun-warmed earth, her eyelids drooping as dark sleep curled back over her.

It had been a little over a moon since the battle in SkyClan, and the ShadowClan fresh-kill pile was still being supplemented by SkyClan prey as Sedgestar allowed the expeditions onto their territory to continue. Frostmask had been over there many times now, and she felt like she won a little victory for Swoopstrike with every scrap of prey she brought back. ShadowClan patrols had been lucky, and they hadn't run into any trouble so far. But, Frostmask's ears twitched as she remembered the concerning conversation she had overheard between Paledusk and Perchpelt a little while ago. Poolcloud had reported it back to Sedgestar that night, but Sedgestar had said that there was not much ShadowClan could do without knowing what the two Clans had planned. So, although Sedgestar had a border patrol share the information with a passing ThunderClan patrol in order to keep the Clans' good relations alive, there had not been much change in ShadowClan's daily activities.

Frostmask though could feel time slipping away as the days got shorter and leaf-bare approached, and she knew whatever RiverClan and SkyClan had planned, it would become clear soon enough.

It was almost too cold these days to spend a midday nap outside the dens, basking in the sunlight. But, today was a rare, beautiful day with a clear blue sky and strong yellow sunlight, and Frostmask was determined to have a calm nap in the sun for one more day before leaf-bare and all its trials properly set in.

Frostmask's ears twitched as through the half-asleep haze that hung over her, she heard paw-steps and the sounds of purrs and hushed voices.

"Shh! Quiet frog-brain—" "—No you are—" "—hear us—" "—that way —"

It sounded as if the cats were talking to each other in incomprehensible fragments. But, Frostmask knew better. She easily recognized the voices as Featherkit and Yewkit, and she knew Lizardkit was surely with them too. The three of them must be talking to each other with paw-sign, and the whispers Frostmask was hearing were only the parts of the conversation that Featherkit and Yewkit felt like saying out loud.

Frostmask kept her eyes shut, still pretending to sleep as the paw-steps got louder as the kittens not-so-sneakily snuck up on her. She heard them pause, and she imagined them readying themselves for the pounce, hindquarters wiggling and eyes bright with excitement.

"Roar!" Yewkit growled as they leapt.

Frostmask rolled smoothly, her eyes flashing open and a purr rumbling in her throat. Yewkit and Featherkit hit the ground where she had been lying. Instead of landing on her back, they collided with each other, tumbling across the ground. Frostmask straightened into a sitting position, holding her chin high as she purred loudly.

"Eep!" Featherkit squeaked, wiggling to get out from under her brother's silver pelt.

"Ha!" Frostmask declared, her blue eyes shining playfully. "You didn't really think it'd be so easy to sneak up on a warrior of ShadowC— *Oomph!"*

Frostmask lurched forward as something barreled into her from behind, tackling her to the ground. Frostmask glanced up to see Lizardkit on her back, his sleek white coat prickling with excitement and his blue eyes bright with pride.

"How'd you do that?" Frostmask said with a laugh. "I didn't even hear you coming!"

She did her best to sign along with her words, at least as much as

she could, being pinned to the ground. The signs helped Lizardkit with his lip reading. He was able to understand a good amount from that alone, but he wasn't as comfortable with it as he was with signing.

'You were distracted.' Lizardkit signed, his expression very self-satisfied.

"We're practicing for our apprentice training," Featherkit meowed as Frostmask stood up.

Frostmask dislodged Lizardkit with a playful shake of her pelt, although she winced slightly as she felt a tender spot on her side where his paws had hit her.

The kits were six moons old now, which meant they were almost adult-sized, so them pouncing on her tended to hurt a bit more now than it did when they were just tiny fluff-balls.

"I'm sure whoever your mentors are, they will be impressed," Frostmask purred, lying back down in the sunshine.

Her eyes started to drift back shut, but Lizardkit prodded her side with his paw, and she blinked her eyes back open.

'Do you know when the ceremony will be?' he asked.

Frostmask felt a twinge in her chest. From what Frostmask had seen, most apprentice ceremonies occurred the very day that the kit hit six moons old. It was almost impossible for Sedgestar to miss it because, more often than not, the kits were counting down the sunrises and pestering their parents everyday leading up to it. But, for these three, that day had come and gone with no ceremony, and it had been a quarter moon since then. Frostmask wasn't certain what was causing the delay, but she suspected it likely had to do with Lizardkit's deafness. The white-furred kit was still very much set on being a warrior despite his disability. But, would Sedgestar let him?

Frostmask glanced at the kits' faces. They each looked anxious about the delayed ceremony, and she found herself trying to set

them at ease.

"I don't know when it will be exactly, but I'm sure Sedgestar and Grovepelt are picking out your mentors right now," she meowed. "He's always careful about pairing apprentices with mentors who will be the best fit for them. So, it takes him some time."

Yewkit settled down, wrapping his tail around his paw.

"Your mentor was our mom's brother, right?" Yewkit meowed, his eyes curious and serious as he gazed at her. "Swoopstrike?"

Frostmask felt a claw of pain stab at her heart at the sound of his name.

"Yeah," Frostmask murmured, glancing down at her paws. "Sedgestar did a good job picking him for me. He was the best mentor I could've asked for... I miss him."

Lizardkit and Featherkit cuddled up on either side of her as they sensed her sadness. Frostmask gave a quiet purr of gratitude to them.

'What was it like training with him?' Lizardkit asked.

"Yeah," Featherkit seconded. "We saw him spend time with Snakeeyes a lot, but he never really played with us like you do. What was he like?"

Frostmask purred lightly.

"I don't think Swoopstrike really knew how to play with kits," she said, signing along with her words. "Honestly, at first I didn't like him. I thought he was grumpy and mean and that he treated me unfairly. But, then I saw how he would also always help me and protect me. He was always there when I needed him to..."

Frostmask stopped signing to scuffle her paws into the ground when she found herself getting overwhelmed with emotion.

"He was a good cat," she concluded.

"I hope we get mentors that good," Yewkit said a bit wistfully.

"I'm sure you will," Frostmask purred.

She stretched again and yawned, but she found most of her sleepiness was gone now. Her ear twitched as Rowanheart came padded over to them, purring hello to his kits.

"Dad!" Featherkit said with a playful growl, leaping on to his back.

"Woah! Careful, you guys are getting a bit big for badger-rides," he purred, playfully shaking her off. "I see you've chosen Frostmask to be the lucky cat who's nap you've interrupted this sun-high?"

'We were practicing stalking,' Lizardkit signed.

"I don't mind," Frostmask purred. "I'm not very sleepy anymore."

"Can we practice with you, Dad?" Yewkit said, turning to him.

Rowanheart arched a brow at him.

"Well I'm not as good-natured as Frostmask, so I'm not letting you jump all over me," he said with a purr. "But, do you want to practice your hunter's crouches?"

"Yes!" Yewkit and Featherkit chorused while Lizardkit nodded along emphatically.

"Alright, come on!" he purred.

Frostmask watched as Rowanheart led the kits away from her to the edge of the camp to practice. He crouched down, and the kits mimicked him. Rowanheart corrected their positions with soft nudges of his muzzle. Frostmask's heart warmed as she remembered Weaseltail doing the same thing to her, Autumnleap, Pineshade, and Poolcloud. Even though Frostmask's tail had been shaking with nervousness the first time, out of fear that she had been doing it wrong, Weaseltail had been so gentle and kind as he helped her position her paws correctly.

"It seems like only yesterday I was the one teaching him how to do

a hunting crouch," Sedgestar's voice said, causing Frostmask to start slightly.

She had been so lost in her own memories that she hadn't noticed him approach her. Sedgestar was standing near her, gazing over at Rowanheart and his grandkits with a look of deep affection in his eyes. Frostmask dipped her head to him respectfully.

"I was also just thinking that it doesn't feel that long ago that I was learning it from Weaseltail," Frostmask meowed.

A quiet purr rumbled in Sedgestar's throat.

"Kits never stay kits for long," he meowed a bit wistfully before blinking and looking away from Rowanheart to glance down at Frostmask. "But, actually, that is what I need to talk to you about. I'm sure you are aware that my grandkits are ready to become apprentices."

Frostmask felt her stomach flip in surprise at the turn of conversation.

"Yes, of course," she said.

Sedgestar tilted his head at her.

"What would you think about being Lizardkit's mentor?" he asked.

Frostmask jolted in shock.

"What?" she meowed, her eyes wide. "Me?"

Sedgestar nodded.

"I've spent a long time thinking about it, due to his condition. And, I think you are the best choice. Also, Snakeeyes is very fond of you, and she's told me how much time you've spent with him as he's grown up," Sedgestar said.

"But- but I'm so young!" she said. "I just became a warrior, surely someone else would be more experienced? I don't know if I'm ready for an apprentice yet."

"I think you don't give your abilities enough credit," he said simply with a swish of his tail. "Besides, I think Lizardkit needs you. He needs someone who knows what it's like to be... doubted. Like how you were doubted because of your heritage, there will be cats who will doubt if he is worthy to be a warrior. I believe Lizardkit is capable, but he will only succeed if he has a mentor that hasn't already given up on him before he even begins training."

Frostmask's tail flipped worriedly behind her, anxiety gnawing in her chest.

"But, what if me being his mentor causes more harm than good?" she said. "Can you imagine what the other Clans would say? 'The rogue's training the deaf apprentice.' Poor Lizardkit would be a laughing stock."

Sedgestar shot her a sharp look.

"Since when do we care what the other Clans think?" Sedgestar said a bit defensively. "Lizardkit has to prove himself as a capable warrior to *ShadowClan* and no one else. The rest of the Clans can laugh all they want. They'll stop laughing when they see our strength and our claws."

Frostmask bowed her head dutifully.

"Still, I don't know if I'm ready," she muttered. "Can't *you* train him? You said that he needs someone who believes in him, and it sounds like you do, at least."

He shook his head, giving a short sigh.

"I considered it, but I don't think it's wise. Lizardkit is my kin... I fear that if I train him, some cats will think he earned his warrior name through my fondness for him rather than his merit," Sedgestar admitted, his tail-tip twitching slightly.

Frostmask turned her face away.

"...I don't want this to sound the wrong way, because I *do* think Lizardkit is a smart and capable cat; I promise," Frostmask murmured, almost afraid to look at Sedgestar. "I've seen him grow,

and I've seen how he has overcome more obstacles already in his short life than some warriors have. I'm sure he'll be able to hunt and fight. But... still, Sedgestar, you must know that there will always be things... that he will never be able to do."

"All of us have things we will never be able to do," Sedgestar responded in a low, quiet voice. "I will never be as connected to our ancestors as Clearstream is. Or, as kind as Emberflower. Or, as strong as Darkpelt."

Frostmask glanced back at him.

"I—" she began, but he cut her off with a shake of his head, raising a paw for silence.

"I know that you have your reservations, and so does the rest of the Clan. If I'm being honest, I do too," Sedgestar said, and his amber gaze softened. "And, maybe I am being soft on the kit. But, Lizardkit wants to train to be a warrior, and that's good enough for me to at least let him try."

"Of course," Frostmask meowed quietly.

"He will be held to the same hunting and battle training assessments as the other apprentices," Sedgestar continued. "If he passes, he will be made a full warrior. If he doesn't..."

Sedgestar glanced down at his paws for a heartbeat.

"Well, that is something we will discuss if that time comes. But, regardless, there will *always* be a place in ShadowClan for him."

He glanced back over at her.

"So, what is your answer?" Sedgestar asked.

Frostmask felt the swirling indecision in her belly slowly give way to steely determination, and she began to nod.

"Okay. I'll do it. For Lizardkit," she said, glancing up at him.

"Excellent," Sedgestar purred, touching her shoulder with his tail-

tip. "I will hold their ceremonies before the evening patrols head out."

Sedgestar padded away from her, leaving Frostmask alone with her whirling thoughts of surprise, uncertainty, and a bit of excitement.

I'm going to be a mentor!

She looked back over across camp at Lizardkit, who was still practicing his crouches with his littermates and Rowanheart. He had the position down almost exactly right, and he was stalking a twig with his brow furrowed in determination. Frostmask purred, her heart already warming with pride.

"Hey Frostmask!" Autumnleap meowed as he padded over to her.

He was coming from the medicine cat's den after getting his scar checked out. He had been cleared back for full duties about a half-moon ago, but earlier that day, he had been having some pain in his old wound, and Frostmask insisted on him checking in with Clearstream or Elmclaw about it.

Autumnleap's gaze flickered across her face as he read her expression.

"What's got you all wound up?" he purred. "You look so tense!"

Frostmask kneaded her paws to displace some of her excess anticipation.

"I just talked to Sedgestar," she meowed. "I'm going to be Lizardkit's mentor. He's holding their ceremonies today."

Autumnleap's face lit up.

"That's amazing!" he purred. "Are you excited?"

"Yeah, kinda," she meowed. "But, nervous too."

"Don't be!" he exclaimed. "You'll be great at it!"

Frostmask felt a rush of warmth in her chest. She was grateful for

how easy it was to tell Autumnleap these things. He was always so supportive.

"Thank you," Frostmask purred in response. "Anyway, what'd the medicine cats say to you?"

Autumnleap flopped down on the ground beside her.

"Nothing bad," he meowed. "Apparently some occasional pain is normal on big scars or old injuries. Nothing you can do about it, and it doesn't hurt you; it's just something that happens and is annoying."

"Hm," Frostmask mused. "Maybe that's why the elders are so achey all the time. It's their old injuries acting up."

Autumnleap purred.

"Like how Greytail always says her ankle aches before it rains?" Autumnleap rolled onto his back, pressing a paw against his scar, his faced creased in concentration as if he was deep in thought.

"Oo my scar's really achin' today!" Autumnleap wheezed, putting on a rasping voice as if he was an ancient elder. "I can feel a snowstorm's comin' tomorrow!"

"Shh!" Frostmask said, playfully kicking his side but still giving a quiet purr. "If one of the elders hear you, you'll be crowfood!"

Autumnleap purred, rolling away from her kicks before he furrowed brow at her.

"Stop that at once, young'un!" Autumnleap continued with a grizzled growl as he shook his paw at her. "StarClan! Kits these days don' show their elders no respect!"

A rush of playful energy flooded Frostmask, and she rolled over, hunching down in a threatening crouch in an instant.

"How's *this* for respect?" she meowed, springing at him.

Autumnleap yelped in a very undignified way then as Frostmask

tackled him, sending the two of them rolling across camp. Frostmask pinned him to the ground, and Autumnleap wiggled feebly under her paws in a very half-hearted attempt to free himself. He gave up entirely after a moment, sprawling out dramatically.

"You killed me," he bemoaned, closing his eyes.

Frostmask unceremoniously dropped all her weight onto him.

"Oomph!" he exhaled sharply.

Frostmask plopped her chin down on to his chest.

"You seem very sensitive for a corpse," she teased.

"I'm still in the process of dying after our mighty battle," he explained.

"Battle?" she echoed, tilting her head in mock confusion. "You really didn't put up much of a fight."

He cracked one eye back open to glance at her.

"Well of course not; I'm like one hundred seasons old," he said, shutting his eyes again. "Honestly, it was really cruel of you to just murder such an elderly cat like that."

Frostmask rolled off of him and shook the dust off her pelt while he continued to lie there, playing dead. She prodded his side with her paw.

"Aren't you gonna get up?" she asked.

"What about 'dead' do you not understand?" His eyes were still tightly shut.

Frostmask purred, then got to work flattening her rumpled fur with a few quick licks. She stilled, the purr dying in her throat as she saw Dampfang and Pineshade emerge from the warriors' den side by side, their heads leaned together as they spoke in close confidence. Autumnleap, sensing the shift in her mood, opened his eyes and sat

up, following her gaze to them across camp.

"She's still talking to him?" Autumnleap asked quietly.

Frostmask's ears flattened.

"I just don't understand it," she said with a quiet growl. "He's crowfood! Everyone seems to know that but her."

"True, but crowfood is still appealing to some," Autumnleap meowed philosophically. "Vultures, for one."

Frostmask flicked his side with her tail.

"Pineshade's not a vulture," she said firmly.

Autumnleap tsked his tongue.

"Are you sure about that? Dark, broody, harbingers of death... That all sounds like Pineshade to me," Autumnleap said with a rumbling purr.

Frostmask furrowed her brow.

"I'm being serious," she chided lightly. "Honestly, it just really ruffles my fur the wrong way. Like I really thought Pineshade and I were starting to be *real* friends..."

Her voice trailed off.

"And, Dampfang's an insufferable piece of snake-dung who's cruel to you every chance he gets?" Autumnleap suggested sympathetically, no trace of amusement left his face.

Frostmask sighed heavily.

"Right," she meowed.

Autumnleap got to his paws to pad over to her side.

"I wish I could fix this for you," Autumnleap meowed. "But, if anyone could make Pineshade see sense, it *certainly* isn't me."

"No one can change her mind. It's her choice," Frostmask muttered, her tone bitter.

"Well it's also her loss," Autumnleap said simply, nudging her cheek with his muzzle. "She's certainly trading down. You're a *million* times better than Dampfang."

Frostmask felt her ears warm. She used to take Autumnleap's compliments of her in stride, but ever since the first hunt they went on in SkyClan territory, they now made her feel all flustered and weird. Like she had moths trapped in her stomach.

"Thanks," she muttered, fiercely hoping that he hadn't noticed her pelt flushing.

Autumnleap started to chuckle to himself.

"What?" Frostmask asked, tensing at the thought that he had noticed her embarrassment.

"I'm just thinking about the look that'll be on Dampfang's face when he realizes you're getting your first apprentice before him," Autumnleap said. "It'll be *so* good."

"Don't be so sure," Frostmask warned. "I have no clue who's mentoring Yewkit or Featherkit."

Autumnleap rolled his eyes.

"Sedgestar puts so much thought into picking mentors, and these are his *grandkits*. You seriously think he's apprenticing one of them to a cat as insufferable as Dampfang?" Autumnleap said.

"Maybe he's thinks it'll build character for the kits or something," Frostmask said drily, and Autumnleap gave a brief purr. "But... you have a point."

Autumnleap's ears pricked.

"Looks like we'll be finding out very soon!" he meowed.

Frostmask followed his gaze to see Sedgestar and Emberflower had

emerged from their den at the base of the Oak Tree, their tails intertwined. Sedgestar leaned into his mate for a moment before he gently unraveled his tail from hers and headed towards Clanrock.

"Oh snake-dung!" Frostmask cursed, rasping her tongue down her pelt rapidly. "Is my fur messed up? Do I look okay?"

Autumnleap purred.

"Isn't it supposed to be the apprentices that are nervous about looking good for the ceremony? Not the mentors?" he said, tilting his head at her.

"Autumnleap!" Frostmask hissed.

"Alright!" he purred, leaning over to flatten a piece of fur that was sticking up on her shoulder. "Now it's perfect."

"Thank you," she said as Sedgestar scaled the Clanrock.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather under Clanrock for a Clan meeting!" Sedgestar's voice rang out.

Frostmask raised her chin, hoping to look dignified as her clan-mates emerged from dens or stirred from their midday naps, blinking sleep out of their eyes as they padded over towards the Clanrock. Frostmask spotted Pineshade sitting next to Dampfang, opposite of her and Autumnleap. Pineshade caught her eye and gave her a friendly nod, but Frostmask just blinked and looked away, her pelt prickling. Her gaze sought out Lizardkit and his littermates instead. They were sitting sandwiched between Rowanheart and Snakeeyes, who were both giving each of them a hasty grooming. The three kits clearly knew what this meeting was about, judging by their pelts bristling in excitement. They shifted from paw to paw, hardly able to keep still.

Sedgestar looked down at his Clan with eyes that shone with pride.

"ShadowClan, we are the strongest Clan in the forest," he began. "And, nothing makes me happier than seeing our Clan grow. Today I would like to announce the making of three new apprentices! Yewkit, Lizardkit, and Featherkit, would you please step forward?"

The fur on Frostmask's shoulders rose as she sensed a murmur of discontent run through some of her clan-mates at Lizardkit's inclusion. She was immediately thrown back to her own apprentice ceremony when the same thing happened then. Frostmask's ears twitched back. Sedgestar certainly wasn't wrong about Lizardkit facing a backlash like she had.

But, Lizardkit walked to the base of the Clanrock his chin and tail held high. His short white fur had been groomed enough by his parents that it gleamed like freshly fallen snow in the sunlight. Yewkit and Featherkit stood on either of his sides, each looking equally as proud. Frostmask felt a pang as she couldn't help but notice how much Yewkit's silver striped pelt reminded her of Swoopstrike's.

Sedgestar's paws and tail began to move as he slipped into paw-signing.

"You all have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed," he said, speaking more slowly than normal so his words matched with his signs. "From this day on, until you receive your warrior names, you'll be known as Yewpaw, Lizardpaw, and Featherpaw."

"Sedgestar," Treefur's rasping voice rang out, interrupting the ceremony.

Sedgestar glanced at where the elder sat with Greytail and Flymask in front of the elder's den, his brow furrowing. Treefur dipped his head to Sedgestar.

"Forgive my interruption, but there is something that I must say," the elder rasped.

Sedgestar's tail flicked in irritation, but he nodded.

"What is it, Treefur?" Sedgestar meowed.

"Is it wise to make the deaf kit a warrior apprentice?" Treefur meowed, blinking his grey eyes. "Day to day, he could get injured by a predator that he didn't notice coming, let alone what could

happen to him during a battle. When my eyesight began failing me, I chose to retire to the elders' den despite the fact that I could've served our Clan as a warrior for many more moons if I hadn't lost my sight."

A quiet murmur of support washed through the Clan at Treefur's words, although Frostmask could see Snakeeyes had her lip curled back at Treefur, seemingly only held in place by the gentle touch of Rowanheart's tail across her shoulders. Frostmask glanced over at Lizardpaw. She could see Featherpaw signing to him, explaining what was being said since he was too far away to read Treefur's mouth.

"Thank you for bringing up your concerns," Sedgestar said, even though Frostmask thought he didn't sound very thankful at all. "But, with all due respect, Treefur, losing your sight as a senior warrior is quite different than Lizardpaw being born deaf. He has been compensating for that his entire life. He has a nose sharper than anyone else here. I'm sure he could scent a dog or a badger or a fox coming long before any of us even hear it."

Treefur blinked.

"Alright, but will he be able to hunt or fight well?" Treefur asked. "How will he know if he's being quiet while he's stalking prey or while he's on a battle patrol?"

"That is something up to his mentor to teach him," Sedgestar responded cooly. "No kit leaves the nursery already knowing how to properly hunt or fight."

"But—" Treefur began.

Sedgestar raised his tail for silence.

"Enough," he said. "I have made my decision."

Treefur dipped in head respectfully. Frostmask knew that the whole Clan knew better than to argue when Sedgestar said he had made up his mind, but judging by Treefur's pinched expression, he'd be quietly complaining about it to the other elders later, out of

Sedgestar's earshot.

Sedgestar glanced back down at the three apprentices.

"Yewpaw, your mentor will be Emberflower," Sedgestar said, continuing the ceremony as if there had been no interruption. "I hope she will pass down all she knows to you."

The pretty ginger warrior walked over to her grandkit, blinking kindly down at the silver tabby.

"Emberflower, you are ready to take on another apprentice. You have trained your previous apprentice, Beeclaw, excellently, and you are a patient and brave warrior," Sedgestar said, a purr in his voice as he praised his mate. "You will be the mentor of Yewpaw."

Emberflower touched her nose to Yewpaw's with a purr, and the two of them stepped aside.

Sedgestar's gaze sought out Frostmask's in the crowd.

"Lizardpaw, your mentor will be Frostmask," Sedgestar meowed. "I hope she will pass down all she know to you."

Frostmask felt a cold wave of nervousness rush through her as he clan-mates turned to look at her as she rose to her paws. But, Autumnleap gave her an encouraging purr and a nudge with his muzzle as she padded over to Lizardpaw, making sure to keep her chin held high. When she reached Lizardpaw, he blinked at her happily, a look of fierce determination in his bright blue eyes. Frostmask purred at him, feeling some of her nervousness quell as she waited for Sedgestar to finish.

"Frostmask, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Swoopstrike, and you have shown yourself to be determined and clever. You will be the mentor of Lizardpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him," Sedgestar said.

Frostmask leaned in to touch her nose to Lizardpaw's, purring harder so he could feel the vibrations through his whiskers. He purred in response, his eyes shining as she pulled her head back.

"Featherpaw, your mentor will be Redclaw. I hope she will pass down all she knows to you," Sedgestar said as Redclaw padded over to the tortoiseshell apprentice.

Frostmask purred happily at the queen as she stood in front of her new apprentice.

"Redclaw, you are ready to take on another apprentice. You trained your previous apprentice, Dappledpelt, excellently, and you are a loyal and fierce warrior. You will be the mentor of Featherpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her," Sedgestar concluded as Redclaw and Featherpaw touched noses.

"Featherpaw! Yewpaw! Lizardpaw!" The Clan chanted, although Frostmask thought it seemed a bit forced.

Sedgestar bounded off of the Clanrock, and the meeting quickly dissolved, some cats coming forward to congratulate the new apprentices while others just sulked off. Redclaw padded over to Frostmask to lick her ear encouragingly.

"Your first apprentice!" she purred. "You're going to be great. I'm glad we will get to train them together."

"I think I'll have a lot to learn from you and Emberflower," Frostmask said with a brief purr.

Redclaw glanced over at the ginger she-cat, who was with Sedgestar, Snakeeyes and Rowanheart, talking to Yewpaw, Lizardpaw, and Featherpaw for a moment.

"I'm grateful I get to spend more time with you, and my sister and her grandkits. What did I do to Sedgestar to get so lucky with this apprentice assignment?" Redclaw purred.

"He probably just knows what a talented mentor you are." Weaseltail's voice rumbled with a purr as he padded up to his mate, draping his long tail over her back.

Redclaw purred and leaned into his side as Weaseltail nodded to Frostmask.

"Congratulations to you too," he said.

"Thank you," Frostmask purred.

Snakeeyes' padded up to Frostmask then, after she had finished talking to her kits. The white queen greeted Frostmask with a purr and an affectionate head bump.

"Thank you for agreeing to train Lizardpaw," Snakeeyes said, her mismatched eyes shining with gratitude as she looked at Frostmask. "He will do well in your paws."

Frostmask dipped her head to the older warrior.

"I hope so," she said.

"I *know* so," Snakeeyes corrected, lightly flicking Frostmask's shoulder with her tail as she padded away. "My brother taught you well."

Frostmask purred slightly, although she felt a small weight of pain settle on her chest. She wished Swoopstrike had been here to see her get her first apprentice.

Frostmask blinked, pulled out of her thoughts as Poolcloud and Autumnleap came bounding up to her. Frostmask's tail curled up happily at the sight of them. Autumnleap was gazing at her with pride in his eyes and a low purr in his throat.

"How'd you get an apprentice so fast!?" Poolcloud said, drawing her attention to him as he playfully narrowed eyes, putting on a look of suspicion. "What have you been bribing Sedgestar with, and how can I get in on it?"

Frostmask purred.

"Nothing!" she protested, but Poolcloud just looked at her doubtfully.

He jumped forward to wrap his paws around her, and Frostmask squeaked, trying to wiggle away. But, there was no escaping the strong tom, and he pulled her into a big, fluffy embrace.

"I swear!" Frostmask gasped.

"I'm not letting you go until you tell me the truth," Poolcloud threatened. "Who are you working with?!"

"No one!" Frostmask said through purrs as she struggled futilely to escape.

She shot Autumnleap a desperate look, silently asking for help. But, Autumnleap was too busy laughing at Frostmask's predicament to even try to think about helping her out of it. Poolcloud followed her gaze towards Autumnleap.

"I should've known," Poolcloud said with a mock growl, dropping Frostmask to spring at Autumnleap.

"I— HEY!" Autumnleap cried as Poolcloud tackled him, and they went rolling away.

Frostmask purred, shaking out her coat and looking after the brothers. She was wondering if she should go intervene, when out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Pineshade approaching her. Frostmask stiffened slightly.

"Hey," Pineshade meowed, giving a nod. "Congratulations on training Lizardpaw."

"Thanks," Frostmask said, glancing behind Pineshade. "Where's Dampfang?"

The question came out more accusatory than Frostmask intended, and she saw Pineshade flinch at her tone.

"He had to go out on an evening patrol," Pineshade said, her voice dropping to a mumble.

"Right. Of course. So, I guess he didn't feel like congratulating the apprentices beforehand?" Frostmask asked, her tail tip twitching.

She knew she was poking a hornets' nest, but she couldn't stop herself. The anger that she felt swirling in her belly when she thought about Dampfang spurred her on.

Pineshade narrowed her eyes at her.

"He agrees with Treefur doesn't he?" Frostmask continued. "He doesn't think Lizardpaw should be training."

Pineshade gave a sharp sigh, and she glanced from side to side before taking a pace closer to Frostmask and lowering her voice.

"Can you really blame him?" she murmured. "I know Lizardpaw is very bright, but it will be hard for any cat to be a deaf warrior. I guarantee Dampfang and Treefur aren't the only cats in the Clan that think Lizardpaw won't be able to do it."

Frostmask blinked.

*And, what about you? Do **you** think he'll fail? And, do you think he will fail because he's deaf, or because I'm his mentor?*

But, Frostmask didn't say her worries out loud, instead she just lashed her tail, glaring at Pineshade with hurt eyes. She couldn't help but feel like Dampfang's lack of faith in Lizardpaw and in Frostmask was something Pineshade shared. Pineshade sighed again.

"Frostmask, stop it," she muttered, dropping her gaze.

"Are you two back together?" Frostmask demanded, blurting out the question.

Pineshade clenched her jaw and lifted her gaze back to Frostmask's.

"Yes," Pineshade said, her voice soft.

Frostmask blinked, taking a step back from her.

"He's different!" Pineshade protested, following her. "Nicer. And, I made him promise, *promise,* that he won't be mean to you. If he says anything cruel about you, I'm gone!"

"I have an apprentice to train." Frostmask forced the words out through her clenched jaw, turning away from her.

"I— Frostmask! Let's talk about this!" Pineshade said, her voice growing more frustrated.

Frostmask felt the fur down her back bristle, but she didn't turn back to her, her gaze locked on where Lizardpaw and his siblings were still sitting with Sedgestar and Emberflower. She heard Pineshade give an angry growl behind her, but then she heard her paw-steps fading as she walked away. Frostmask sighed heavily, her pelt prickling and her stomach rolling, but she tried to put on a smooth face as she approached the group. Lizardpaw perked up as Frostmask walked up to him, turning his eager gaze onto her.

'Are we training?' he asked, his paws flashing.

Frostmask's gaze flickered to Emberflower, and she spotted Redclaw padding up to the group as well.

"Well, on my first day as an apprentice, I was given a territory tour," Frostmask meowed, looking at the older warriors for guidance.

Emberflower glanced towards the sun. It was quickly dipping towards the horizon.

"Let's save starting the tour for dawn tomorrow," Emberflower meowed. "It'll take most of the day to cover all the territory, and it'll be better for the apprentices to have the tour in the light to help them develop a mental map of the land."

Frostmask nodded. That made sense.

Then what should I do with Lizardpaw this evening?

Frostmask opened her mouth to ask the question, but she closed it just as quickly, her pelt prickling. Sedgestar trusted her to be a mentor. She didn't want him or Emberflower or Redclaw to think she was helpless and floundering with Lizardpaw.

Sedgestar touched his muzzle to Emberflower's ear in farewell.

"I'll leave you to your training then," he meowed, getting to his paws.

He nodded goodbye to Redclaw and Frostmask, and with a swish of his tail, he turned and padded away, heading towards Grovepelt.

Emberflower glanced at Frostmask and Redclaw.

"Meet back here at dawn so we can all go on the tour together?" Emberflower asked.

"Works for me," Redclaw purred.

Frostmask nodded.

"Sure," she meowed.

She watched as Redclaw and Emberflower guided their apprentices away then, already murmuring to them, leaving only Frostmask and Lizardpaw.

Frostmask's tail swished with indecision.

"Why don't we go into the forest? We can hunt a little and then gather some moss to make your new nest in the apprentices' den?" Frostmask said distractedly, wondering what Emberflower and Redclaw were doing, and if it was better than what she just suggested.

Lizardpaw nodded eagerly, although Frostmask suspected that he would've done the same to anything she suggested.

"Great, let's get going." Frostmask signaled towards the camp exit with her tail.

In a flash, Lizardpaw took off, charging through the thorn tunnel, leaving Frostmask blinking in surprise.

"Wait for me!" she called to his back, running after him.

It was a heartbeat after the words left her mouth that she remembered Lizardpaw couldn't hear them.

Frostmask burst through the thorn tunnel, her gaze flickering around to search the forest around her. She spotted Lizardpaw not

too far away. Luckily his white pelt acted like a beacon for her eyes in the darkening forest. He had stopped to sniff around the base of a tree. Frostmask trotted up to him, huffing a bit in annoyance as she flicked his shoulder with her tail to get his attention.

"You can't just run off like that," she spoke and signed. "You need to tell me what you're doing or where you're going."

'Sorry,' Lizardkit signed quickly, but he still seemed distracted.

His wide eyes were roving the forest around them, taking everything in, and his nose twitched constantly as he inhaled in the scents of the woods. Frostmask twitched her tail, trying not to hold his distraction against him. The multitudes of scents that must be barraging him at the moment may almost be overwhelming for his sensitive nose.

"Well... it's okay," Frostmask meowed. "Just try not to let it happen again, please."

Lizardpaw nodded.

"Um... do you smell any prey nearby?" Frostmask asked.

'No.' Lizardpaw shook his head.

"Let's head in the direction of the ThunderClan border. But, stay with me this time."

The two of them padded in silence through the forest for a bit, and Frostmask couldn't stop her mind from wandering back to her argument with Pineshade about Dampfang. She felt her shoulders stiffen as the anger came back to her.

Pineshade's being such a frog-brain! Dampfang's only nice when he has something to gain from it. He couldn't be different now... right?

Frostmask lashed her tail.

No. She hardened her resolve. *Pineshade will see soon enough. Dampfang will slip up, because he's* ***Dampfang****, and she'll have her sense knocked back into her...*

Frostmask was pulled out of her silent fuming as Lizardpaw suddenly stopped, raising his muzzle.

'Mouse,' Lizardpaw signed, his eyes bright with excitement.

Frostmask drew the air over her tongue. She wasn't able to scent any prey, but she trusted Lizardpaw's nose.

"Great catch. I can't even scent it yet," Frostmask said, shoving thoughts about Dampfang away. "We can track it down, but why don't you show me your hunting crouch first..."

Frostmask's voice trailed off as she realized Lizardpaw had already wandered a few tail-lengths away from her, nose to the air as he tracked the mouse scent.

'Lizardpaw,' she signed, trying to catch his attention, but he wasn't looking at her.

Frostmask's brow furrowed, feeling a spark of frustration run through her pelt.

How was she supposed to train Lizardpaw, if he wouldn't even pay attention to her!

Both she and him would fail... just like how Dampfang and the others suspected.

She lashed her tail.

What would Swoopstrike do if he was me?

It was easy to imagine Swoopstrike's snarling voice in her mind.

"Focus up frog-brain, or you'll be going to your nest hungry tonight, and the only patrol you'll be put on is for moss for a moon!"

Frostmask sighed quietly to herself. Swoopstrike may have said that, but she wasn't him. And, she didn't think it's do Lizardpaw *or her* any good by her acting like a cat she wasn't.

Frostmask stomped a paw on the ground sending vibrations running

through the earth, and Lizardpaw twisted his head around to look at her. Frostmask gestured him over to her. He came padding up to her, his tail raised high questioningly. Frostmask took a deep breath as she tried to sort out what she wanted to say.

"Lizardpaw," she began, signing and speaking. "It is very important that you pay attention to this training. We need to be able to—"

Lizardpaw had been watching her intently at the beginning of the sentence, but his gaze had already began to drift away from her by the end, so now he was staring back out into the forest.

Frostmask felt a rush of hot irritation run through her, and she slammed her paw to the ground to get his attention again, but this time she did it half out of frustration. Lizardpaw's eyes snapped back to her.

"Don't you get it?" she growled, her tail lashing. "I'm your mentor; you need to listen to me! You know what Treefur said back there! There are cats that don't believe you can do this, that *we* can't do this. Do you want to prove them right?!"

Lizardpaw was gazing at her with wide eyes; his ears flat against his head. Frostmask felt her anger fizzle out as a heavy weight of guilt dropped down into her stomach. She wasn't sure how much of that outburst Lizardpaw had caught just from lip-reading, since she hadn't been signing. But, from the look on his face, it must have been enough.

She knew she wouldn't've snapped at him if she hadn't let her anger with Pineshade and Dampfang get the better of her. Frostmask's ears flattened down.

She shouldn't be taking her frustration with them out on him. Lizardpaw had nothing to do with it.

"I'm sorry," Frostmask said along with paw-signs, but Lizardpaw had looked away from her.

He was gazing stiffly down at his paws, his eyes blinking hard. Frostmask reached a paw out and gently touched his side so his

gaze flickered up.

'I'm sorry,' Frostmask signed very deliberately. *'I know you want to be a warrior. I want you to be a warrior too. And, I'm sorry I got mad. I got into a fight with Pineshade today...'*

Frostmask trailed off and waved off the rest of that thought.

"But, that doesn't matter," she continued, speaking again with her signs. "I shouldn't take my anger out on you. Let's try to be a team alright? We need to learn how to listen to each other."

Lizardpaw nodded.

'I'm sorry too,' he signed, his wide blue eyes earnest. *'I'll try harder to pay attention. I really want to be a warrior. I don't want them to be right.'*

Frostmask rasped her tongue over his forehead, hoping he could feel the vibrations of her purr in her throat.

'Don't worry.' she signed. *'We'll show them.'*

A Winter Chill

Frostmask shivered as the icy winter breeze cut through the clearing like a claw. She cast a glance up at the dark sky. She hoped that once the sun rose above the horizon, its weak rays would help warm the forest up a bit.

Frostmask didn't like leaf-bare. The cold stirred up dark, half-forgotten memories in her mind. The pang of a hollow belly. The sting of icy crystals forming in her fur around her nose and eyes. The soft, wailing mewls of her brothers in her ears which slowly turned to hard, empty silence as they starved to death around her. The frigid trek through a forest of white and grey, her tiny paws cracked and bleeding, leaving a trail of crimson through the snow behind her, but she continued to stumble along because her mother said she must...

Frostmask jerked, giving her head a hard shake like she was trying to dislodge her memories. She shuddered and blinked hard, bringing herself back to the present.

Think about what's happening now. How lucky we are.

Prey was getting harder to find, but Frostmask's belly wasn't empty. ShadowClan wasn't starving. There wasn't even snow on the ground yet. It was cold out, and the ground was hard and frozen under her feet instead of the damp, flexible and sometimes outright boggy texture that she had gotten used to for the past several moons. But, at least she wasn't walking through knee-high snow, slush, and ice.

Frostmask's ears pricked, and she was pulled out of her thoughts.

She listened closely, but she couldn't consciously make out any suspicious noises, just the sound of the wind through the trees. Still... she felt the fur on her shoulders prickle anyway. She sensed something was nearby. Her gaze flittered around the dark woods that surrounded her, encircling the mossy clearing she stood in. She

blinked as she saw Lizardpaw's bright white pelt appear out of the corner of her eye. He stood out starkly in the darkness as he came prowling around the trunk of the Burnt Sycamore to stand at her side, the Burnt Sycamore at their backs.

Frostmask's ears twitched, and they angled in the direction of another sound in the woods. She identified the noise this time. A snapping twig. Someone was definitely there. Frostmask turned to meander around the clearing, and she glanced over at Lizardpaw. His eyes were trained in the same direction that her ears had pointed in, tracing a path out into the woods.

Then Lizardpaw was slinking off, his body pressed as low as possible to the frozen ground. Despite the black night that the forest was cloaked in, his white color actually blended in well to the grey-white of the icy moss that coated the clearing floor. Frostmask continued to patrol around the Burnt Sycamore, keeping her eyes away from Lizardpaw to not give away his position.

By the time Frostmask made a full circuit around the tree, Lizardpaw was gone, having vanished into the forest. Frostmask was halfway around the clearing again when she heard a yelp.

"Snake-dung!" Featherpaw's annoyed voice called out through the forest.

Frostmask's tail lifted, and she couldn't stop a soft purr from rumbling in her throat. She headed over in the direction of the cry, waiting by the edge of the clearing where it came from. She heard the sound of paw-steps rushing over. Lizardpaw came bounding out of the dark woods first, his blue eyes shining and his tail held high in triumph. His sister, Featherpaw, emerged a moment later, looking sulky. And, finally came Redclaw, who just shook her head in amusement when she took in the very different expressions on the siblings' faces.

"It's not fair," Featherpaw complained to Lizardpaw. "How'd you find me? I disguised my scent and *everything."*

'You made a noise,' Lizardpaw signed. '*Then I saw you.'*

Featherpaw scowled at him.

"How did you know I made a noise?" she asked. "Redclaw and Frostmask were just supposed to give advice about planning the attack or defense of the Burnt Sycamore, not help us find each other. Were you cheating?!"

"Frostmask didn't tell him anything, but I think her twitching ears gave you away," Sedgestar's voice cut in as their leader padded over from where he had been observing the exercise at the edge of the clearing.

Frostmask flattened her ears to her head.

"Sorry," she meowed. "I didn't even think about that."

Sedgestar rumbled a brief purr.

"It's alright. You and Lizardpaw didn't break any rules. I told you not to talk to your apprentices to help them find each other, and you didn't. Even I didn't anticipate twitching ears betraying someone's position," Sedgestar said before turning to Lizardpaw.

"You are more observant than I expected," he said with a purr.

Lizardpaw puffed up his chest. Frostmask gazed at him proudly, happy with how well he did at this test. He'd won two of the four rounds, one for the offensive and one for the defensive of the tree. Frostmask had feared that Featherpaw's hearing would've given her a large edge over him, but Lizardpaw had managed to hold his own against his sister. They had been training together for about a moon now, and Frostmask felt like she and Lizardpaw were finally establishing a good rhythm as a team.

Sedgestar glanced up at the sky. The horizon hadn't lightened yet, but Frostmask suspected dawn couldn't be too far off.

"But, that's enough of 'Sycamore Defense' for the night. Let's head back to camp," Sedgestar meowed before glancing at both Lizardpaw and Featherpaw. "You both did well."

Featherpaw's annoyance at being beaten this last round had already

faded, and she and Lizardpaw nudged and wrestled together good-naturedly as the five cats headed back towards camp.

"The energy of those kits!" Redclaw purred to Frostmask as they walked. "I don't know how they do it. I'm definitely ready to collapse in my nest and take a nice long nap until after sunrise."

Frostmask purred in agreement, casting a glance over at Lizardpaw, who was now bounding ahead of the group. He had gone through a brief growth spurt in the past moon, and he was taller than Frostmask now, but thin and gangly— all legs and tail. Frostmask glanced at Sedgestar. He, Lizardpaw, and Rowanheart all shared the same long-legged, lanky form.

They reached the dense thorn barrier that encircled the camp, and they ducked through the tunnel. Frostmask's ears pricked at the sound of coughing echoing through the camp as she emerged into the clearing. An outbreak of whitecough had appeared in the elders' den, and she knew Clearstream and Elmclaw were working hard to contain it before it could spread and turn into its much more deadly brother— greencough. Anyone that had so much as a sniffle was confined to the medicine cat's den for a few days for monitoring. So far, whitecough had marked Greytail and Flymask, as well as Buzzardkit, and just yesterday Frostmask thought she saw little Cricketkit coughing too.

Frostmask's tail twitched as she thought of those kittens' family. Poor Dawntail was a mess. The medicine cats had gently forbade her from entering the den as to not spread the cough to her healthy kits, but for the past few days, she'd seen the queen often staring longingly into the cave from the outside, as Elmclaw carried the fresh-kill she brought for the kits in for her.

Frostmask shook her head to try to shake off the grim thoughts. The medicine cats' plan of containment seemed to be working at least, and so far the cough hadn't spread into the apprentices' or warriors' den.

Frostmask turned to Lizardpaw.

"You should go get something to eat," she said and signed. "Then

you can nap a bit if you want, and we'll resume training after sunrise. You did very well tonight."

'Are the elders and queens fed?' Lizardpaw asked.

"They should've been by Yewpaw," Frostmask replied, giving a tail flick. "Go on now, I can hear your stomach growling."

'Well, I can't.' Lizardpaw responded with a cheeky look, but he trotted over to the fresh-kill pile as Frostmask sent him off with a good-natured swat at his tail.

After Lizardpaw padded off, Sedgestar turned to Frostmask.

"Frostmask, can I talk to you for a moment?" he meowed.

She nodded, curiosity pricking at her as her leader took a seat next to her while Redclaw and Featherpaw padded away.

"I was wondering if you would allow me to train with Lizardpaw for the rest of the day," he said. "I'm glad I got to observe the exercise, but I would like to assess firsthand how his progress is coming along."

Frostmask felt her stomach clench with unease.

Does he not trust me to train him well?

"It has nothing to with you," Sedgestar continued as if he could read her thoughts on her face. "You know Lizardpaw's training is a unique case. I just want to make sure he's on track."

"Well... he's a great hunter," Frostmask meowed. "Sometimes it seems like he can pick out a single mouse scent from halfway across the forest. Although, you might have to remind him sometimes to put his paws down more lightly when he's stalking prey. And, he can also get distracted a bit at times from scents and lose focus on what you're saying to him..."

Sedgestar nodded, his expression thoughtful.

"Do you want me to come with you two?" Frostmask asked.

"I'd like to take him alone, if that's alright with you," Sedgestar meowed.

Frostmask's whiskers drooped slightly, but Sedgestar touched his tail to her side.

"I want to see how he does without your help," he explained. "I've heard from Emberflower how well you two work together, and if tonight's exercise is any indication, he must often read your body language for cues to help him locate things when he can't hear them himself. Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course, but there will be times when he won't have you in sight to help him. He will have to rely on other cats, or on just himself."

Frostmask nodded.

"Alright," she meowed. "What should I do today then?"

Sedgestar's whiskers twitched.

"Go hunting or patrolling with your friends?" he suggested. "You've been spending a lot of time with Lizardpaw; I'm sure Autumnleap, Pineshade, and Poolcloud miss having you around more often."

Her ears twitched and her paws prickled at the mention of Pineshade. She wondered if Sedgestar knew about the falling out she had with her at Lizardpaw's apprentice ceremony. They had hardly talked since. Or, at least, Frostmask had hardly talked to her. Pineshade has made a few attempts, but Frostmask always found an excuse to get away.

"Yes, Sedgestar," she murmured, dipping her head.

With a nod of farewell, Sedgestar got to his paws and padded over to Lizardpaw to tell him about his training for the day.

Frostmask rose to her paws to head to her nest for a nap, and her gaze flickered around camp. Her eyes settled on Pineshade's dark pelt as Frostmask spotted her eating a mouse by Clanrock, and she hesitated.

Maybe this would be a good time for Frostmask to try to extend a

branch of peace by inviting her to hunt with her today. Frostmask's ears twitched. She'd be lying if she said that she didn't miss spending time with Pineshade. Even though Frostmask still had other friends, losing both Pineshade's company and Swoopstrike's so close together left an aching hollow in her chest. It was a profound sense of loneliness that she hadn't experienced since she was a misfit, outcasted kit.

Was she being too harsh on Pineshade? She *had* said that she would leave Dampfang if he was mean to Frostmask. And, to her and Dampfang's credit, for the past moon, he had been completely tolerable to Frostmask. Not that either Frostmask or Dampfang were going out of their way to be friendly or chatty, but the few times that Frostmask and him had been forced on patrol together, he just chose not to speak to her. But, he didn't spend the whole time sneering or glowering at her either. He simply acted like she and Lizardpaw didn't exist. But, that was fine with Frostmask. Maybe the best she could ask for.

Frostmask sighed softly, her heart twisting.

She knew Pineshade thought she was being unfair and pushing her away. But, Frostmask knew it was the opposite. It was Pineshade's fault. She was the one that chose to drive Frostmask away by picking *him.* She left her. Just when they were finally real friends.

Frostmask blinked, gripping the cold ground under her paws.

Could she accept that? Could she still be friends with Pineshade, knowing that Pineshade chose someone that hurt Frostmask, over choosing her?

Pineshade's eyes lifted from her meal as if she could feel the heat of Frostmask's gaze on her pelt. Her amber gaze met Frostmask's blue one. For a heartbeat, Frostmask thought about walking over to her. But, her legs didn't move. Pineshade slowly lowered her gaze back down to her food, her head bowed in what looked like dejection. Frostmask's tail twitched guiltily, but she turned away from her.

Frostmask ducked into the warriors' den, padding slowly over to her nest. Her gaze flitted over where Pineshade's new nest was— away

from hers and next to Dampfang's. But, she shook her head slightly, telling herself not to think about that as she turned her gaze onto Autumnleap's fluffy auburn and white pelt instead.

Frostmask flopped into her nest next to Autumnleap, and he rumbled a sleepy purr as her flank brushed his as she settled in. But, he quickly nodded off, back into a deeper sleep. Frostmask washed her face briefly before closing her eyes and drifting in an uneasy sleep.

Frostmask woke up around midmorning, judging by the light streaming into the den entrance. She yawned and then rolled over to face Autumnleap's board back. He was still curled up, sleeping peacefully.

She gave his side a light touch with a paw, but he just shrugged it off, muttering something unintelligible. A quiet purr started to build in Frostmask's throat, and she felt some playful energy chase away the rest of her sleepiness. Frostmask kneaded her paws into Autumnleap's shoulders, trying to wake him.

Autumnleap twitched, but didn't rouse. Frostmask let a hint of her claws slip out, not enough to hurt him, just enough to prick a little.

"I— huh— wha'?" Autumnleap jerked, and Frostmask pulled her paws back, purring louder.

His gaze blinked open blearily, and he yawned, stretching his paws out in front of him. He rolled over to face her, his cheek still pressed against the moss.

"Hey Frostmask, wha's up?" he mumbled, blinking up at her sleepily.

She tilted her head as she looked down at him.

"Want to come hunting with me?" Frostmask meowed. "Sedgestar is training Lizardpaw today to evaluate his progress, so I'm looking for something to do."

"I'm honored you've chosen me to be the cat you waste your day with," Autumnleap meowed in a very solemn voice, lifting himself

into a sitting position and giving his pelt a shake as if to dislodge his grogginess.

Frostmask purred.

"I pick only the finest when it comes to squandering time," Frostmask said, her voice just as serious.

Autumnleap yawned again and slipped into another stretch. Frostmask rose to her paws, and flicked his flank with her tail.

"Let's get going." Her paws itched to start the day, and she turned, heading to the den's exit.

"You're doing this wrong," Autumnleap said with a purr, trotting behind her to catch up. "There's no rush when you're wasting time."

They ate a quick meal, then headed out into the territory, walking through the pine forest at a brisk trot to keep their muscles warm. They caught a couple of mice each as they chatted with each other about nothing in particular. The sun was creeping higher in the sky as they passed through the marsh in the direction of the WindClan border.

Frostmask couldn't help but feel a pang in her chest as she glanced at what leaf-bare had done to the marsh. What had been almost overflowing with life and bursting with color in green-leaf was now totally still and desaturated. The sycamores had lost their leaves, and the grasses and flowers had all dried up and died, so only brown skeletons of them remained. The icy ground was grey and hard under her paws, and the reeds didn't stir with water birds, frogs, salamanders, and insects.

As Frostmask and Autumnleap entered back into the evergreen pine forest, Frostmask glanced up at the trees, grateful that they still looked just the same as ever.

"How's training Lizardpaw going?" Autumnleap meowed as they padded along.

"Great!" Frostmask said with a purr. "I just hope I'm doing a good job at mentoring him."

"I'm sure you are," Autumnleap said with a reassuring blink. "What's it been like?"

"Well he's very clever and a fast learner," Frostmask meowed. "Just as long as he's paying attention. He gets distracted pretty easily by sights or scents. Then he acts like 'oh I *didn't know* you were telling me something because I'm deaf' but I know he's lying, the little snake-heart."

"He sounds like a pawful," Autumnleap said with a soft purr.

"Aw, he's really not," Frostmask said, laughing. "He just thinks it's fun to get a rise out of me sometimes."

Frostmask flicked Autumnleap's flank with her tail.

"Reminds me of someone else I know, actually," she meowed drily, shooting him a look out of the corner of her eyes.

She expected Autumnleap to retort back then, but he just gave a soft, almost forced purr. Frostmask's brow furrowed, and she turned her head to study him a bit more closely. He seemed like he was nervous for some reason, his ears twitching uncomfortably every few heartbeats.

"Hey, are you okay?" Frostmask meowed. "Something bothering you?"

Autumnleap kept his eyes staring forward for a heartbeat longer before his gaze flickered to hers, and he looked at her intently for a long moment. Frostmask returned his gaze curiously, tilting her head at him.

"Um, kinda," he admitted quietly, his gaze breaking from hers again. "It's just something that I've been wanting to talk to you about."

"What is it?" she asked, her mind filtering through the events of the past moon as she tried to pick out the possibilities.

Her ears twitched back. Was it because she was fighting with Pineshade? Did Autumnleap want them to make up? Or, was it

something else entirely? Had something happened to Autumnleap that she missed while she'd been training Lizardpaw?

Autumnleap's eyes made contact with hers again, and he studied her.

"Do you really not know?" he murmured in a low voice.

Frostmask's brow furrowed deeper. Her first instinct was to say '*no,*' but as she looked into his steady gaze, she felt a shiver run up her spine. It was the same weird feeling that Frostmask had gotten about a moon ago when she and Autumnleap had been on SkyClan territory together.

It was a strange, frightening, and breathless emotion—a fusion between excitement and trepidation.

A current of unease dragged at Frostmask's paws, and she noticed her pads becoming damp with anxious moisture. She felt much more comfortable with pushing the feeling away and ignoring it, than having to peer more closely at what was inside.

"I- uh..." Frostmask said awkwardly, her tail twitching. "Oh look, squirrel scent! Let's find it."

Frostmask felt a strong rush of gratitude for the distraction, and she veered away from Autumnleap, putting her nose to the ground to follow the scent.

"Frostmask, wait! Wait!" Autumnleap yowled, bounding up to her and touching his tail tip to her shoulder. "Stop it. I really do need to talk to you."

His voice was insistent. Frostmask's tail twitched with unease, but she allowed him to slow her to a stop.

"Does it have to be now?" she protested lamely. "That squirrel seems close."

Autumnleap looked completely bewildered as he gazed at her.

"What are you doing? Why are you being like this?" he meowed.

"Being like... what?" Frostmask attempted.

She knew she couldn't keep the facade of ignorance up much longer. Autumnleap let out a huff that sounded half amused and half exasperated.

"Nice try, but I know you're smarter than that," Autumnleap said.

Frostmask stilled. Silence fell over her, and her ears twisted back as the rest of her protests dried up in her mouth. Autumnleap was always a stubborn cat when he had something locked in his mind, and it was clear she wouldn't be able to so easily steer him away from this conversation.

"I really need to talk to you," Autumnleap repeated, his voice becoming low and quiet. "Needed to for a while. But, it's been hard..."

"Autumnleap," Frostmask said, but Autumnleap gave his head a sharp shake, holding up a paw.

"Let me finish. *Please."*

His gaze was serious when it met hers.

Frostmask nodded, feeling a rush of guilt about how much she really *didn't* want him to continue, when it was so clear that it meant so much to him that he did. Autumnleap paused for a moment just to let his gaze search hers, and she saw nervousness wash over his expression again.

"It's- uh- It's been hard because there's been just so much going on with SkyClan. Swoopstrike... And, now Lizardpaw. And, I've been just nervous about it myself, which makes it easy to put off. Like, until 'the time is right.'"

He shuffled his paws.

"But, I realized that I can't keep waiting for the perfect time to talk about it because there will never be a *perfect* time to..."

"But, does that time have to be *now?"* Frostmask burst out, unable to

stop herself from speaking again. "Can't it be some other day?"

Frostmask's stomach swirled as if she had swallowed a whole flock of moths, and her pads felt clammy. Autumnleap studied her, his expression becoming a bit confused and hurt.

"Why do you keep trying to stop or distract me?" he meowed as he drew away from her slightly, his brow furrowed.

Frostmask felt a sharp jolt in her chest at the look of pain in his eyes.

Snake-dung! I didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"I'm sorry." Frostmask's ears flattened against her head. "I just—"

"Don't you care about what I have to say?" His voice was hot with accusation as his tail twitched. "You're supposed to be my friend."

Frostmask's eyes widened.

"I am your friend!" she said, giving a soft gasp at the insinuation otherwise.

She stared at Autumnleap. He was still glaring at her with hurt eyes, his auburn and white form stiff. His chin jutted out in a stubborn way as he sulked, not satisfied with her response.

"You're my *best friend,"* she emphasized, digging her claws into the ground. "And, that's just it! I can't... *We* don't need to talk about anything. Why can't we just, you know, keep things normal?"

"I don't want to keep going on like this," Autumnleap muttered, his voice low.

"What? What's wrong with normal? Why not?" Frostmask pressed, taking a step towards him.

He dug his feet into the ground, the fur down his back rippling.

"Because I love you!" Autumnleap snapped, fire burning in his amber eyes. "I always have!"

Frostmask froze.

Someone could've dumped a whole river of icy water on her head at then, and she wouldn't have even twitched a whisker. Her heart hammered underneath her rib cage like it was a trapped bird, frantically flapping its wings to escape. She couldn't make sense of the maelstrom of emotions that swirled inside her stomach, or the jumbled thoughts in her head. But, she did recognize the feeling of mounting panic building in her muscles.

She tried in vain to swallow several times, but her mouth had suddenly gone as dry as sand.

Autumnleap stared at her rigid form as the moments stretched on.

"StarClan, Frostmask! Say something!" he exclaimed, his tail lashing in agitation.

In his eyes, Frostmask could make out a mixture of fear, worry, and a dash of hope. Frostmask's jaw clenched.

The emotions inside her were too overwhelming.

"I- I can't." Frostmask's voice rasped in the back of her throat, her eyes as wide as an owl's.

The confusion was palpable on Autumnleap's face as he blinked at her rapidly.

"You... can't?" he echoed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Her lip quavered.

"I can't!" she wailed. "I'm sorry!"

Frostmask suddenly found herself able to move again as she whipped around. Her paws took off, carrying her away from him without thinking about where she wanted to go. Running just felt right. Like if she went fast enough, she'd be able to outstrip the new, frightening, overwhelming feelings, the hurt look on Autumnleap's face, and the rest of this entire situation.

"Frostmask! Stop! Wait!" Autumnleap cried from behind her, but Frostmask just doubled down on her speed.

She felt her heart breaking when she thought about how this must be hurting him, but she couldn't face him. Not right now.

Frostmask was able to out-sprint Autumnleap enough that she could no longer see him behind her in the woods, but she knew him well enough to know that he was surely still following her. Frostmask leapt onto the trunk of a nearby pine tree, scrambling far enough up the tree to hide herself in the dense pine needles. Her paws trembled as she crouched there, panting. Soon enough she heard Autumnleap's paw-steps as he ran over, searching for her in the woods.

"Frostmask!" he was still calling, his voice full of sorrow. "Frostmask, please come back!"

Frostmask screwed her eyes shut, shaking harder. A part of her wanted nothing more than to leap out of the tree, run over to him, apologize, and bury her face in his familiar pelt. But, the other part of her kept her hidden in the tree because it knew that desire was exactly the problem. She dug her claws into the branch, feeling a sudden jolt of anger.

Why did he have to say those things! Now things between us will be changed forever! I've lost my best friend!

But, the other part of her mind rallied against those thoughts.

That's not true! He's still the same cat! If there's anyone ruining the friendship, it's me by being horrible and hiding from him!

...

And, besides... I am really sure that I don't love him back?

Frostmask felt another rush of panic at the thought, which almost sent her fleeing again, but she dug her claws into the bark to keep herself in place.

I can't! I can't! He's my best friend, so I already love him. But, I can't

*really **love** him!*

But, against her will, an image started to form in her mind of her and Autumnleap lounging around the camp together, sharing tongues. On the surface it wasn't an unusual scene; really, it was something they did all the time. But, this time there was a different note to Frostmask's purr as she bumped her head against Autumnleap's, and she felt a thrill in her chest when he rubbed his muzzle under her chin before resting his cheek on her paws with a contented sigh.

Frostmask jerked, coming back to herself as her mind shifted suddenly to much darker thoughts. She remembered the icy dread and gut-wrenching pain she felt both when she woke up to May's stiff and cold body at her side and saw Swoopstrike's corpse lying in the center of camp.

She started to feel ill to her stomach as she imagined Autumnleap dead instead. It wasn't hard to picture. She had already seen him torn open, limp and bleeding. But, this time, when her gaze frantically searched him for signs of life, his flanks would be still instead of rising and falling.

Frostmask clenched her jaw, shaking like a leaf. She'd already told Autumnleap how she couldn't lose him too, and that was when she just thought of him as her best friend. So, she *can't* really love him... because if she did, then losing him might actually destroy her completely.

Frostmask flattened her ears, trying to block out the sounds of Autumnleap's repeated calls for her as she did her best to curl up in a tiny ball on the branch. She didn't know what to do. She just knew this was all too much for her.

So that you might hear me

The sky was a mask of soft grey clouds, blocking out the rising sun, and the first snow of the season was drifting down to blanket the forest floor when Sedgestar called the clan-meeting. Frostmask sat next to Lizardpaw in front of the holly bush that formed the apprentices' den as the clan gathered. She kept her gaze upturned towards Sedgestar on Clanrock to stop her eyes from wandering to a familiar dark ginger pelt across camp.

Frostmask's stomach flipped, her jaw clenching at just the thought of *him.* After the disaster in the woods a quarter moon ago, Frostmask had been so horribly embarrassed, and she still was, truthfully. The entire situation was so awkward that it made her want to crawl out of her own pelt, but she had known that no matter what she was feeling, she had to apologize. So, she'd sought him out afterwards and that's what she did.

But, Autumnleap had been so upset. He *was* so upset. He didn't act like it. He didn't seem angry. He hadn't even raised his voice at all when Frostmask had told him that she was sorry. She had tried to read the emotions in his eyes then, but they were carefully blank. All he had said was "It's fine," without meeting her gaze, and somehow those two words hurt her more than any yowls could.

Frog-brain! Frostmask scolded herself, digging her claws into the ground.

Her heart twisted in pain. She wished she hadn't been such a mouse-heart. Running away from him seemed like the worst thing she could've done in that moment. And, she wished that she wasn't *still* being so cowardly now. For the past few days, she'd been throwing herself into training Lizardpaw to avoid him. The only time when she and Autumnleap were even close physically was when they were sleeping in the warriors' den together. And, even then, their pelts no longer brushed.

Frostmask exhaled sharply through her nose. She felt like a dark

cloud hung over her head, turning the world around her gloomy and grey, but she didn't know what to do, or who to turn to, or how to fix it! Without Autumnleap, who did she have left really? Swoopstrike was gone...

Frostmask's ears flattened. Lizardpaw noticed her expression and shot her a concerned look.

'You okay?' he signed.

Frostmask blinked, then tried to refocus herself, jerking her head like she was shaking off cold water. She nodded to Lizardpaw and started listening to Sedgestar, who had been speaking for the past several moments.

Frostmask blinked in surprise as she realized that, absorbed in her thoughts, she had missed most of the clan meeting. She shook her ears and forced herself to pay attention.

Mosspounce and Murmurstep had just been made warriors in a clan meeting the evening before, and Sedgestar was following that up with another ceremony this morning. He was now making Buzzardkit, Cedarkit, Cricketkit, and Hollowkit apprentices. Cricketkit had recently recovered from her fit of whitecough, but Buzzardkit was still sick, along with some of the elders. So, although he was getting his mentor today, he still wouldn't be able to start training until he was fully healed.

It looked like Buzzardpaw had already been assigned Kestrelmoon as his mentor, judging by the way the two were sitting close to each other. Buzzardpaw had been allowed to sit outside the medicine cat's den entrance at the base of Clanrock, but Frostmask felt a pang of worry about how weak he looked. His posture was hunched over and his eyes were ringed with red and swollen up, although his expression seemed happy for himself and his littermates. Hollowpaw was sitting next to Rowanheart, who must be her mentor. And, Cedarpaw next to Dampfang...

Dampfang!

Frostmask felt the fur on her shoulders rise, but she gave her head a

sharp shake, and glanced over to Cricketpaw, the last ceremony.

"—Pineshade, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Grovepelt, and you have shown yourself to be intelligent and brave. You will be the mentor of Cricketpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her," Sedgestar said.

Frostmask blinked in surprise. But, as Pineshade walked over to the grey-and-cream tortoiseshell, Frostmask couldn't help but purring softly. Pineshade's amber eyes were bright and eager as she touched noses with the small statured Cricketpaw.

Pineshade will be a good mentor.

"Buzzardpaw! Hollowpaw! Cedarpaw! Cricketpaw!" The clan cheered, and Frostmask along with them.

"Stay on the look out for sickness, everyone," Sedgestar meowed to conclude the ceremony. "We still have whitecough in the camp, and we don't want it spreading around to everyone. If you are feeling bad, please go see Clearstream or Elmclaw."

Sedgestar bounded down from the Clanrock, dislodging the little bit of snow that had collected on his pelt as he sat. As cats began to pad away, the clan meeting over, Frostmask rose to her paws and hesitated.

Should I go congratulate Pineshade?

Frostmask glanced in her direction. Poolcloud, Redclaw, Weaseltail, Grovepelt, and Autumnleap were over there now, surrounding her and chatting happily. Frostmask felt her heart fall down to her stomach as she glanced at Autumnleap, and she ducked her face away from them, her ears flattening. Frostmask started to turn away when she heard a voice call her name.

"Frostmask."

Her ears pricked back up in surprise. It was Grovepelt.

He was padding over to her from Pineshade. Frostmask turned to

the deputy, dipping her head to him respectfully. But, when she glanced back up, she couldn't stop her brow from furrowing in concern when she notice he was walking with a slight limp.

"Hi Grovepelt, how are you doing?" Frostmask meowed.

Grovepelt's whiskers twitched faintly.

"You're asking about my limp?" he said.

Frostmask's ears began to heat in embarrassment that he had so easily seen through her question, but Grovepelt just shook his head.

"No, no it's alright," he said with a brief purr. "This weather has just got my joints feeling stiff, that's all."

Frostmask nodded, and Grovepelt tilted his head to study her, his green eyes kind.

"Anyway though, I came over here to check on you, not for you to check on me. Is everything alright?" he meowed.

"Oh! Uh—" Frostmask said, her eyes widening in surprise. "Yeah, um, everything is fine. Lizardpaw's training is going well..."

Grovepelt shook his head, gently interrupting her.

"I wasn't asking about Lizardpaw," he meowed. "I was asking about you."

Frostmask felt her stomach flip with nerves, and Grovepelt turned to Lizardpaw.

"Why don't you go get some breakfast?" he meowed to the apprentice. "I'm just going to talk to Frostmask for a bit."

Lizardpaw's eyes were round with curiosity, but he nodded obediently to the deputy, turning and padding off to the fresh-kill pile. Grovepelt inclined his head towards some shelter from the snow that the branches of the holly bush offered.

"Let's get out of this weather," he said, his voice genial. "This snow's

not doing my joints any favors."

Frostmask nodded and trailed after him as he led her to the clear patch of ground, her tail dragging on the snow. She couldn't help but feeling like she was a wayward apprentice about to be scolded. But, it was nice to be out of the wet snow for a bit as they settled in under the holly branches.

"You seem sad, Frostmask," Grovepelt meowed, not missing a beat.

Frostmask blinked in surprise at the blunt statement, but Grovepelt's voice was gentle and concerned, not accusatory. Frostmask stared down at the ground and shrugged half-heartedly.

"I haven't been in the best mood for the past couple moons," she muttered the admission at her paws.

"I know losing Swoopstrike must be hard for you," Grovepelt empathized in a quiet voice.

Frostmask's ears went flat against her head as her stomach twisted. The last thing she wanted to dwell on right now with everything else going on was how much she missed her mentor. Grovepelt gave a small nod as if to accept her silence.

"I know how difficult grief can be. I'm not a stranger to loss either... I was a young cat when my mate died."

Grovepelt's voice was so soft Frostmask almost thought she could've imagined it. But, when she glanced over at him, he was gazing out into the camp with green eyes that welled with grief, as if he was talking about a tragedy that happened only yesterday, and not something seasons upon seasons ago.

"Her name was Honeyfall," Grovepelt murmured the name with such sorrow and tenderness, Frostmask's heart clenched painfully for him. "And, I loved her and our kits more than life itself. But, I was a different cat back then, as a young warrior. Brash, reckless, fearless."

Grovepelt shook his head.

"And, so very foolish," he said, growling the words out if he was cursing himself. "She died during a ThunderClan raid. A tragic accident, but I couldn't accept that at the time. I was filled with thoughts of vengeance. I tried to talk our leader into striking back at ThunderClan in revenge. She refused me, wisely so, but I did it anyway. I went behind her back, and I gathered up a group of hotheaded warriors like myself... including my kits, Cardinalstripe and Juniperhaze. StarClan, they were so young... Younger than you are now. They had just gotten their warrior names, and they wanted revenge for the death of their mother as I did. But, now I think that they were doing it mostly to please me. If I had not been so consumed by revenge then they—"

Grovepelt paused to inhale a long, deep breath, as if he was bracing himself for what came next.

"Our attack on ThunderClan was a disaster," he muttered the words in a low voice. "Cardinalstripe and Juniperhaze were killed. Cardinalstripe during the battle, and Juniperhaze the next morning from her wounds... Afterwards I wanted to die. I thought StarClan had kept me alive as a punishment for my behavior, and every night I would lie awake, wishing that they let me be killed too. It would've been easier than living with the suffering. The grief and the guilt, missing my mate and my kits, and knowing that they died because of *me."*

Grovepelt's head sagged down as if the very weight of the words pressed down onto his back. Frostmask could do nothing but stare at the deputy with eyes round with sympathy, not knowing what to say.

Grovepelt blinked hard several times as if he was trying to pull himself out of the memories and bring him back to the present. He glanced over at Frostmask.

"I lived in that darkness for many moons. I had no will to live. I'm still convinced that I would've died back then when my sorrow finally consumed me, if it wasn't for a few new bonds I made," Grovepelt murmured. "I know it did not happen all at once... but one day, it felt like I blinked, and I realized that I had something to live for again: A timid little kit with awkwardly long legs, and ears

and paws much too big for his body..."

Grovepelt's voice cracked with emotion, but then he laughed, shaking his head as his shoulders vibrated with gentle purrs.

"Sedgestar saved me. Although if you were to ask him, he'd tell you it was the other way around," Grovepelt's expression was deeply fond as he turned his eyes back out towards the snowy camp. "Anyway, you may think that these are just the ramblings of some sad, old cat. But, my point is you are not alone, Frostmask. In the depths of grief, everything may seem dark, but that's not the truth. When wandering in that fog, it is so easy to only see the darkness. It requires no effort. You may even feel like you deserve to live in it forever. But, there is still light and life out there, if you only have the strength to seek it out. Or, allow yourself to look at the light when it comes to you."

Frostmask stared down at her paws, her ears flat against her head.

"But, weren't you scared of losing Sedgestar too?" she murmured to the ground. "Like your kits?"

Grovepelt turned his head to look at her with a gentle gaze.

"Of course I was," he meowed. "Truthfully, I still am. But, no one can live with a closed heart forever. If I had... if I had never grown to love Sedgestar as my son... Well, my life wouldn't've been worth living."

Frostmask lifted her chin to gaze out into camp. She was searching for Autumnleap's ginger fur, but he wasn't there.

"The first step is always the hardest," Grovepelt murmured. "The first new connection is the most painful. You're right. It's scary to think you may again feel the same pain you once did. It's only natural to want to protect yourself. And, sometimes it feels like a betrayal to the ones you lost. How could I love someone as much as I loved my mate? My kits? But, that's no way to honor their memory. To live the rest of your life in misery... They wouldn't want that for you."

Frostmask was still looking out into camp, and instead of ginger fur, her eyes found a dark pelt. Pineshade was still in the clearing, talking with Cricketpaw. Grovepelt followed Frostmask's gaze with his own.

"It gets easier," he continued. "After the first, you find more. More things to love. More purposes to live for."

Frostmask lowered her gaze back down to her paws, and there was a beat of silence.

"I noticed you didn't go congratulate Pineshade after the ceremony," Grovepelt said.

Frostmask glanced over at him, but his gaze remained resting on his former apprentice. Frostmask dipped her head in concession, feeling some shame prick at her pelt.

"I don't presume to know what happened between you two," Grovepelt continued. "Or if that's part of what's causing your sad mood. But, I wanted to make sure you know that you mean a lot to Pineshade. Even if she has trouble telling you that."

Frostmask blinked, her ears pricking up a bit. But, when she glanced back at Pineshade, and her ears went flat again.

"She's with Dampfang now." The words slipped out of Frostmask's mouth without her even meaning to say them.

Grovepelt glanced at her from the corner of his eye, and Frostmask bowed her head in embarrassment, her pelt prickling. She felt foolish sharing her petty drama with Grovepelt when he seemed to have suffered so much more in his life than she had. He also had running a clan to worry about, not her silly problems... but it was too late for her to take the words back now.

"She cares about him more than me," Frostmask murmured down at the ground.

"There's always room in someone's heart for more than one cat," Grovepelt meowed quietly.

Frostmask's tail twitched, and she didn't respond right away. But, Grovepelt just gazed at her patiently, waiting for her to continue.

"I know. It's not that..." Frostmask mumbled. "It's just that Dampfang hasn't treated her very well in the past. Or, been very nice to me either... But, Pineshade's back with him anyway. It makes me feel like she doesn't care about me. And..."

Frostmask's voice trailed off, and she sighed softly.

"And, you're afraid that he may hurt you again? Or, he may hurt *her* again?" Grovepelt asked.

Frostmask nodded mutely. Grovepelt was silent for a moment.

"You don't have to like Dampfang to still be friends with Pineshade," Grovepelt said, his voice gentle. "I know you're worried about her, but if you want to support her, aren't you better off being her friend? What if something does happen with Dampfang, would she tell you about it right now? Would you be able to help her, if you and her aren't even speaking?"

Frostmask's brow furrowed. ...Truthfully, she hadn't thought about it that way. She glanced over at Grovepelt.

"But, it still feels like she picked him over me," Frostmask meowed.

She knew she sounded like a petulant kit, but she was unable to ignore that feeling of hurt. Grovepelt tilted his head at her.

"Do you think that's what Pineshade intended?" he meowed quietly. "Does she see it that way?"

Frostmask's ears flattened as she recalled Pineshade's pleading voice, asking Frostmask to understand. How she vowed that if Dampfang did anything to Frostmask, she would end her relationship with him.

"No..." Frostmask murmured.

Grovepelt was silent for a moment.

"Why don't you talk to Pineshade about it?" he suggested gently. "Cricketpaw isn't cleared yet for full duties, since she's still a bit weak from whitecough, so she can't do a full territory tour today. But, you and Pineshade could take her and Lizardpaw on a patrol down the WindClan border. How does that sound?"

Frostmask nodded slowly.

"Alright, Grovepelt," she murmured, getting to her paws. "...And, thank you."

Grovepelt gazed at her kindly.

"Anytime," he said with a purr.

He looked like he was back to his calm, friendly self, the grief that had marred his features earlier washed away.

Frostmask dipped her head to him.

"Sedgestar is lucky to have you. And, so is the rest of ShadowClan," she said quietly. "I'm glad you found something new to live for."

Grovepelt blinked and looked at her with fond eyes.

"Thank you, Frostmask," he meowed. "So am I."

Frostmask padded back into the snow and signaled Lizardpaw over to her. He had finished eating and was just waiting by the Clanrock. He came trotting back over to her, his expression inquisitive.

'Grovepelt wants us to go on a patrol down the WindClan border with Pineshade and Cricketpaw,' she signed, omitting the rest of their more personal conversation.

Hollowpaw, Cedarpaw, Rowanheart, and Dampfang were already gone, maybe to go tour the territory. Buzzardpaw had returned to the medicine cats' den, but Cricketpaw and Pineshade were still in camp, talking to each other. Frostmask padded up to the black-furred she-cat slowly. Her paws dragged on the snowy ground, and she felt nerves swirling in her stomach.

"Hey," she meowed softly.

Pineshade's ears pricked, and she stopped talking to Cricketpaw, turning to Frostmask. Her amber eyes were a bit wary.

"Hey," Pineshade muttered in response.

Frostmask scuffled her paws in the snow.

"Uh, I know Cricketpaw's still recovering from whitecough, so Grovepelt suggested that we take our apprentices on a patrol down the WindClan border... since she can't do a full territory tour today," Frostmask said, forcing herself to hold Pineshade's gaze. "If that's okay with you?"

Pineshade began to nod slowly.

"Alright," she meowed.

Frostmask felt a stirring of relief in her chest.

"Should we get going?" she meowed, and Pineshade nodded, signaling for Frostmask to lead the way.

Together the four of them padded out the thorn barrier.

The Carrionplace

The first part of the patrol had little small talk between them as they headed through the snowy woods towards the WindClan border. Awkward silence hung heavily between Pineshade and Frostmask, even while Lizardpaw and Cricketpaw chatted cheerily together. Or, more accurately, Cricketpaw chatted and signed while Lizardpaw responded as silent as usual, but Frostmask could tell from his demeanor that he was happy to be spending time with his old den-mate.

Frostmask found herself chewing the inside of her cheek indecisively as they continued deeper into the woods. How did she even begin the conversation with Pineshade? ...Should she just say that she's sorry?

"What can you scent, Cricketpaw?" Pineshade meowed, and Frostmask blinked, pulled out of her thoughts.

Cricketpaw lifted her muzzle obediently to the air. Her eyes were eager at being given her first real apprentice task. But, her excitement seemed to wane as the moments stretched on while she continued to scent the air silently.

"Um... the air smells like mostly snow..." she meowed, her face uncertain. "Cold and icy..."

She shot a hesitant look at Pineshade.

"Am I supposed to be able to scent something else?" Cricketpaw meowed, her expression crestfallen.

Frostmask saw Lizardpaw's paws begin to flash in a response, eager to help her out, but Frostmask shook her head at him quickly, and he paused. This was something Cricketpaw should get to figure out by herself. Frostmask observed Pineshade silently out of the corner of her eye, curious to see how the often hot-tempered warrior would respond to her apprentice. But, Pineshade's expression was

all patience for Cricketpaw.

"Snow masks scents, but you should still be able to pick a few others out. Try opening your mouth and drawing the air across your tongue," Pineshade meowed. "Scents are heightened that way."

Cricketpaw nodded and parted her jaws to breathe in the air. Her eyes brightened immediately.

"Cat scent!" she meowed, her tail perking up. "Lots of it... but it smells strange... WindClan?"

Pineshade nodded.

"Very good," she purred, her tail curling up happily for her apprentice. "We're getting close to the WindClan border."

Lizardpaw sniffed the air, his face curious. Frostmask glanced at him, recognizing his expression. He got that look when he caught a faint scent, which Frostmask wasn't able to pick up yet.

'Cedarpaw is close by too,' Lizardpaw signed.

Frostmask felt the fur down her back ripple slightly with unease. If Cedarpaw was touring the territory nearby, Dampfang would be there too.

The last thing I need is to run into that frog-brain right when I'm trying to fix things with Pineshade!

She gave Lizardpaw a nod of acknowledgement, and then she cast another side-glance at Pineshade to see if she had any reaction to Lizardpaw. But, if Pineshade had seen his signs, she was doing a good job at looking uninterested.

Soon they reached the final line of trees that bordered the moor. Frostmask stared out at the rolling fields, which were now nothing but a sea of white snow, as she half-listened to Pineshade sharing information about WindClan to Cricketpaw a little ways away from her.

Lizardpaw, though, was right at Frostmask's side, but even being so

near to her, he was close to invisible in the snowy landscape. Her apprentice attracted her attention with a touch of his tail against her flank.

'Dampfang and Cedarpaw approaching,' He warned, casting her a glance.

Frostmask's tail twitched. She knew Lizardpaw was aware she wasn't fond of Dampfang. It wasn't something she tried particularly hard to hide. But, if she had to guess though, she didn't think Lizardpaw liked Dampfang very much either, even without her influence. As far as Frostmask could tell, Dampfang never acknowledged Lizardpaw at all... as if he couldn't stand the thought of the existence of a deaf apprentice.

Frostmask's lip curled up slightly at the thought.

Or, maybe it's just me. Maybe it's just because Lizardpaw is my apprentice.

Frostmask shook her head, trying to focus. She pricked her ears, listening for Dampfang's and Cedarpaw's paw-steps, but she didn't hear anything besides the rush of the wind as if the snow was muffling her ears. She opened her mouth to taste the air, and she then managed to catch a whiff of their scents. Frostmask glanced to the side and saw two dark silhouettes cutting through the snow. Unlike camouflaged Lizardpaw, Dampfang's black pelt stood out in the snow like a piece of crowfood in the fresh-kill pile. Cedarpaw's dark tabby pelt didn't fare much better.

Frostmask saw Dampfang's tail lift when he noticed Pineshade and Cricketpaw.

"Pineshade!" he meowed in greeting, padding up to her as Cedarpaw trailed behind him.

Pineshade and Cricketpaw turned to them, and Frostmask's saw Dampfang's gaze slide past Pineshade and meet hers.

"Oh. Why are you here?" Dampfang said, his green eyes immediately going cold.

Frostmask wanted to curl her lip up at him in response, but she resisted for Pineshade's sake.

You're trying to make up with her, remember?

"Frostmask and Lizardpaw are patrolling with us," Pineshade answered for her. "Clearstream doesn't want Cricketpaw doing the full territory, so we're just going down the WindClan border."

"I'll come along with Cedarpaw too," Dampfang said, looking away from Frostmask and back to Pineshade. "I was just about to show him the border."

Frostmask felt hot irritation lick at her pelt.

Dampfang's not a leader or deputy! The nerve of him to just invite himself onto our patrol without even asking.

"Alright," Pineshade responded, even though it was clear from Dampfang's tone that his words were a statement, not a question for permission.

Frostmask snorted derisively to herself, turning her face away from Dampfang, but she didn't say anything to protest.

The now six cat patrol headed down the border with Frostmask and Lizardpaw trailing behind the rest of the group. Frostmask listened sulkily as Dampfang bragged about the amount of territory that he'd already covered with Cedarpaw during their tour.

"We've already gone through the marsh and the Carrionplace," Dampfang was saying. "After this, I'm going to head back towards the ThunderClan border, stopping by the Burnt Sycamore before getting to the thunderpath."

Pineshade was nodding along with him. Dampfang puffed out his chest.

"Cedarpaw was already able to catch a mouse on the way over here," he boasted. "We buried back by the marsh to pick up later."

"Well done," Pineshade said, with a nod to the apprentice.

Frostmask saw Cedarpaw duck his head down shyly at the praise, but his pelt prickled with pride.

"Why don't we have a friendly competition between the apprentices?" Dampfang meowed, his tail twitched with eagerness. "We can see which of them can catch the most prey as we travel down the border."

Pineshade's ears twisted back uncertainly.

"Cricketpaw's still on light duties," she reminded him. "I don't think it's a good idea to push her too hard."

"Alright," Dampfang meowed smoothly. "We can just do Cedarpaw and Lizardpaw then."

Frostmask felt the fur on the back of her neck stand up as Dampfang cast her a glance over his shoulder then, waiting for her response. Frostmask narrowed her eyes at him. She knew his suggestion wasn't a friendly competition, but a thinly veiled attempt to prove that his apprentice was better than Lizardpaw, or to prove that he was a better mentor than Frostmask.

"A competition like that seems hardly fair to Cedarpaw," Frostmask said, her voice cool but polite. "Lizardpaw has been training for a moon now, but it's just Cedarpaw's first day."

"Nonsense," Dampfang scoffed. "Cedarpaw caught a mouse on his first day! He's clearly naturally talented. And, besides, he doesn't have the same... incapacities as Lizardpaw."

Frostmask's pelt started to heat with anger, but she didn't say anything, glancing down at Lizardpaw instead. He was staring at her, clearly waiting for an interpretation. He had missed most of Dampfang's words since Dampfang had been carelessly tossing his words over his shoulder, not bothering to accommodate Lizardpaw at all.

Frostmask signed to Lizardpaw so that Dampfang would have no chance of eavesdropping.

'He wants you and Cedarpaw to have a hunting competition, to see who

gets the most prey until we reach the end of the WindClan border. You don't have to do it, if you don't want to. There's no reason to play Dampfang's games.'

Lizardpaw's blue eyes flickered away from hers and to Dampfang. Her apprentice's chin raised, a stubborn look entering his eyes.

'Tell him I'll do it,' Lizardpaw signed. *'But, it's his fault if I hurt Cedarpaw's feelings by crushing him.'*

Frostmask felt a quiet purr building in her throat.

"Alright. Lizardpaw agrees," Frostmask said, her gaze flickering back to Dampfang's.

She saw Pineshade look back at her uncertainly, clearly realizing that the tension between Frostmask and Dampfang was escalating. But, Pineshade didn't say anything to protest as Dampfang gave a curt nod of agreement.

"Should we start now?" Dampfang meowed.

Frostmask nodded in agreement and flicked her tail at Lizardpaw. In an instant, he silently vanished into the snow like a ghost.

Frostmask had to stop her whiskers from twitching in smug amusement when she saw Dampfang glancing around in confusion, searching for Lizardpaw, only to realize he was already gone.

"After him," Dampfang said, turning to Cedarpaw quickly.

Cedarpaw gazed back at Dampfang for a moment, his expression hesitant.

"Aren't you coming with me?" he meowed.

"No, you'll do it alone," Dampfang said.

Frostmask brow furrowed. Her smug amusement soured as her stomach turned uneasily.

Dampfang wasn't going to keep an eye on his apprentice? Even

though it was Cedarpaw's first day outside of camp?

"But, how will I find you afterward?" Cedarpaw protested, his eyes widening. "I haven't been in this part of the territory before."

"Follow your scent trail back," Dampfang huffed.

"But, you're not staying here, right? You'll still be walking?" Cedarpaw asked.

"Yes, we'll be walking down the WindClan border the whole time," Dampfang said, an impatient growl in his voice now. "Just stay close to the border yourself, and you'll be fine. The competition's over once we reach the end of the border."

"O-okay..." Cedarpaw said.

He slowly turned his back on the patrol, padding out into the snowy forest. Cedarpaw hesitated a moment, shooting a final glance over his shoulder like he was hoping Dampfang would call him back. But, Dampfang just gave him a nod, and the apprentice turned, his tail drooping as he padded out into the trees. Frostmask felt her stomach clench as she watched the young apprentice go.

Maybe I shouldn't've agreed to Dampfang's dumb idea. I was so eager to show what Lizardpaw can do that I didn't think about how the competition would affect Cedarpaw...

Frostmask felt the snow swirling fiercely around her pelt, and for a moment, she was a tiny kit again, confused and lost in a forest of ice and snow. She shuddered and brought herself back to the present.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea, Dampfang," Frostmask found herself saying. "It *is* pretty cold and snowy out. And, Cedarpaw's right; he doesn't know the territory well. He could get lost."

"Are you afraid that your apprentice will lose?" Dampfang challenged, shooting her a sharp look.

Frostmask narrowed her eyes at him but refused to take the bait.

"I'm afraid for Cedarpaw," she said firmly. "It's his first day outside of camp. *Ever*. You should call him back. Or, go with him at least."

Frostmask glanced over at Pineshade and Cricketpaw. Frostmask noticed the young apprentice's eyes were wide and worried for her littermate before Frostmask turned her gaze to search Pineshade's expression for support.

"You can't think this is a good idea, Pineshade," Frostmask meowed. "Our mentors would've never sent us out on a solo hunt without any training. Or without even a proper territory tour! The forest can be dangerous."

Pineshade blinked then turned to Dampfang.

"I think Frostmask's right," she said to him tentatively. "We can always have another competition once the apprentices have some more training. Then Cricketpaw can participate too."

"I know my own apprentice's capabilities," Dampfang snapped, his neck fur bristling defensively. "And, Cedarpaw's going to be fine. I'm right here, nearby! We can easily get to him if he's in trouble."

Frostmask clenched her jaw but remained silent, and Pineshade didn't protest Dampfang again either.

What should I do? I could ignore Dampfang and go after Cedarpaw, but then Dampfang would just drag me back to camp to tell Sedgestar how I've stuck my nose into his training...

Her tail twitched uneasily.

Cedarpaw will be okay... Dampfang's right that we won't be too far from him at least...

The rest of their journey down the WindClan border was spent in uneasy quiet. Frostmask was careful to scent the air as they went, and she was relieved that she caught traces of both Lizardpaw's and Cedarpaw's scents in the snow as they continued onward. Once they reached the end of the border, the group paused, waiting for the two apprentices to rejoin them. It wasn't long until Lizardpaw appeared, pushing through the now knee-high snow with two mice

clutched in his jaws.

"Only two mice?" Dampfang said with a scoff as he approached the group.

Lizardpaw paused.

'Hunting was poor,' he explained, although Frostmask wasn't sure if Dampfang had even bothered to learn Lizardpaw's signs.

Lizardpaw headed over to Frostmask, placing the two mice on the snow next to her.

"Have you seen Cedarpaw? I'm worried about him being alone in the forest," Frostmask meowed to Lizardpaw, but she cast a pointed look at Dampfang.

Lizardpaw shook his ears 'no.'

"I'm sure he'll show up any moment," Dampfang sniffed. "We should just wait here a little while longer."

Quiet settled over the group again. Frostmask could feel herself getting colder and colder as the moments stretched on. She hadn't been too uncomfortable earlier when her body was warm from walking, but now that they were just standing there, the snowy breeze seemed to cut through her pelt like a cold fang.

Frostmask pricked her ears, searching for any hint of Cedarpaw on the breeze, but she could hear nothing but the sound of the snow howling through the pine trees around them as the storm grew more intense. The branches above their heads strained in the wind, and there was still no sign of Cedarpaw.

"He should be back by now," Pineshade said, breaking the silence over the group. "We should look for him."

Frostmask nodded in agreement, her tail twitching anxiously.

"Will he be okay?" Cricketpaw murmured, turning big, worried eyes onto Pineshade.

"I'm sure he's fine, just a little lost," Pineshade reassured her.

"Maybe he got turned around and went the wrong way down the border?" Frostmask suggested.

Pineshade began to nod thoughtfully, but then Dampfang hissed.

"Cedarpaw isn't a frog-brain," he spat to Frostmask.

The fur down Frostmask's back bristled. Her annoyance towards Dampfang turned to anger as her worry for Cedarpaw grew.

"I didn't say that," she snapped back. "But, he is young, and he may have gotten confused."

"My apprentice can handle himself," Dampfang said, raising his muzzle into the air.

Frostmask dug unsheathed claws into the snow. A surge of powerful anger at Dampfang's willful blindness seared her skin, chasing away the chill of the snow.

"No, he can't. You've been training him for less than a day," Frostmask hissed, lashing her tail. "You've taught him *nothing."*

Dampfang snarled and took at threatening step towards her.

"Dampfang," Pineshade warned, shooting him a sharp glance.

Frostmask glared at Dampfang, and blue and green gazes burned into each other.

"I don't care if you help me or not," Frostmask spat at him before he could decide to respond. "But, I'm going to find Cedarpaw. I'm not going to let your *ego* kill your apprentice."

Dampfang gave a low, rumbling growl in his throat, but Frostmask turned her back on him. She hoped that the display firmly demonstrated that she didn't see his aggressive posturing as a threat.

'Can you try to track Cedarpaw?' Frostmask asked Lizardpaw.

Her apprentice's eyes were wide after watching her and Dampfang face off, but he blinked quickly as if to focus himself on Frostmask's question before parting his jaws to breathe in the air.

'There's no scent here, but I had noticed a trail when I was coming here with the mice,' Lizardpaw signed.

"We'll track him from there then," Frostmask said, snatching up the two mice by their tails to take them with her and signaling with her tail for Lizardpaw to lead the way.

She didn't look back to see if anyone was coming with them as she followed Lizardpaw into the storm, but she did hear paw-steps crunching on snow behind her.

As they padded through the grey and white forest, Frostmask finally gave into her curiosity and shot a quick glance behind her. Pineshade and Cricketpaw were following, and even Dampfang was trailing behind them, although he looked like he loathed every step he took after her.

Frostmask turned her gaze back to Lizardpaw.

At least even Dampfang has some limits about how frog-brained he'll be.

Lizardpaw paused, his nose twitching. Frostmask parted her jaws, being careful not to drop the mice from her mouth, to see if she could scent anything too, but she could only taste the sharp bite of the icy wind.

Lizardpaw touched his nose with his paw, then signed Cedarpaw's name.

"Lizardpaw's caught his scent," Frostmask translated for the cats behind her, meowing around the mice tails in her fangs.

Lizardpaw turned and plunged into the forest, kicking up snow behind him as he ran. Frostmask bounded after him quickly. She had to stay close or she'd easily lose sight of the white-furred tom in the storm.

Then we'd have two apprentices to track down...

Lizardpaw's path was unwavering through the forest as the group ran. They were heading away from the WindClan border, traveling deeper into ShadowClan territory.

Cedarpaw must have gotten really lost.

Frostmask felt mounting concern in her belly. It filled her veins with urgency, encouraging her to run faster. Frostmask blinked in surprise as Lizardpaw led them into a clearing, and through the falling snow, a tall, metallic web emerged, looming over the cats threateningly.

The Carrionplace.

Frostmask felt the fur on her shoulders rise with unease. She normally gave this part of the territory a wide breath. She hadn't been this close to it since Lizardpaw's territory tour, and before that, her own tour as an apprentice. Of course, no cat was allowed to go past the webbing, into the strange two-leg territory, without Sedgestar's permission. But, Lizardpaw led the group to a gap in the silver net where he hesitated.

'Cedarpaw's scent goes through there,' he signed, but even the normally confident Lizardpaw looked nervous as he shot Frostmask a look.

Frostmask stared out into the Carrionplace. The two-leg stuff inside seemed a bit less menacing than normal with the snow piled on them, turning them into harmless looking piles of white. But, when Frostmask opened her mouth, through the scent of snow, she could still pick out the pervasive reek of rats and the unnatural scents of the two-leg items.

The fur down her back rippling with worry, Frostmask dropped the mice she was carrying in the snow and turned to glare at Dampfang.

"Didn't you tell Cedarpaw not to go in the Carrionplace?!" she hissed, not bothering the hide the blatant accusation in her voice.

"Of course," Dampfang growled, twitching his tail. "Maybe *your* apprentice is wrong about the scent trail."

Frostmask glared at him but ignored the jab. She turned to look at Pineshade, deciding that she wouldn't even bothering asking Dampfang's opinion.

"Should we go in?" she asked. "We're not supposed to without Sedgestar's approval, but if Cedarpaw's in there, and he's in trouble..."

Pineshade hesitated and shot a glance at Dampfang as if she was looking for guidance, which just made Frostmask's lip curl up in disgust. Pineshade was absolutely the last cat in this whole forest that needed someone else to tell her what to do!

But, before anyone could say anything, a quiet, pitiful wail echoed through the air, snapping Frostmask's gaze back towards the Carrionplace. She dug unsheathed claws into the snow as the cry rose the fur on her shoulders. It definitely sounded like a cat that needed help.

Frostmask turned her head back to the group, her mouth open to suggest they go ahead in, but she saw that Dampfang had already ducked through the silver webbing and bounded inside without waiting.

Frostmask gave a hiss of frustration. Even when they were all trying to help Cedarpaw, Dampfang still refused to work with her.

Pineshade turned to Cricketpaw.

"You should stay outside," she meowed firmly to her apprentice.

Cricketpaw gazed at her in dismay.

"But I want to help find Cedarpaw too!" she protested.

Pineshade shook her head.

"It's not safe," she said. "You're still recovering from whitecough, and you don't have any training. If Cedarpaw is in trouble, I don't want to have to worry about you getting hurt too. Alright?"

Cricketpaw's gaze flickered from Pineshade to stare out into the

Carrionplace, where Dampfang had already disappeared between the large piles.

"What is this place?" she whispered. "And, what is that sour animal smell?"

"Rats," Frostmask meowed grimly.

Pineshade nodded.

"Two-legs bring odd things and their old food to the Carrionplace," she explained. "It attracts rats. It's dangerous, which is why you need to stay out here."

Cricketpaw's pelt pricked with fear, but she nodded. Pineshade stepped towards her to rasp her tongue over her forehead reassuringly.

"If we're not back soon, I need you to go back to camp and tell Sedgestar or Grovepelt where we are and what happened," Pineshade meowed. "Can you do that? Do you remember the way back to camp?"

Cricketpaw nodded again, her eyes as wide as an owl's.

"Good," she meowed. "Now, go stay out of sight. We'll be back before you know it."

Pineshade turned to Frostmask, motioning with her tail for her and Lizardpaw to follow, then she headed into the Carrionplace.

Frostmask snatched the mice back up again and padded after Pineshade through the silver webbing. Her pelt prickled with fear as they crept closer to the piles of two-leg junk. The piles were unevenly covered with snow with many dark nooks and crannies, and she could occasionally make out flashes of metal or unnaturally bright colors peeking out through the white. Her ears pricked and swiveled to the noise of faint skittering all around her, but she could see no movement.

Maybe it's coming from inside the piles.

Frostmask shivered, but it wasn't from the cold. She could almost *feel* dozens and dozens of eyes fixed on their group, peering out from the shadows in the piles. Frostmask took a step closer to Lizardpaw.

'Stay near me,' she warned, shooting him a sharp look so he knew she was serious.

Lizardpaw nodded, his blue eyes round and his nose constantly twitching as if the odd two-leg scents and the smell of rats were overwhelming for him.

"Which way does Cedarpaw's scent go?" Pineshade whispered, nodding at Lizardpaw for him to guide them.

Lizardpaw hesitantly crept forward to take the lead, but Pineshade and Frostmask stuck close to his tail in an attempt to keep young apprentice safe.

Frostmask shot a look out of the corner of her eye at Pineshade as they crept through the looming piles. Frostmask wasn't sure if it was Dampfang's disappearance or the dire situation, but Pineshade seemed back to her normal self— collected, confident, and easily taking the lead instead of hesitant and looking at Dampfang for his opinions before offering her own.

Frostmask was snapped out of her thoughts, and her gaze flew to the side as she heard a soft *thump*. She saw a clump of snow rolling down one of the piles and a dark flash across it, which quickly disappeared into one of the many crevices in the snow.

'What was that?' Lizardpaw asked, glancing back at her and noticing her bristling pelt.

'Rat,' Frostmask responded. *'Let's keep moving. Quickly.'*

They picked up their pace, trotting now around the piles. Frostmask kept a look out for Dampfang in addition to rats, but she wasn't sure were the dark warrior had went. If they were lucky, maybe he had already found Cedarpaw.

"Look!" Pineshade whispered, nodding at the snow on the ground

ahead of them.

Frostmask felt her pelt prickle with relief as she followed Pineshade's gaze to see paw-prints in the snow. They were too small to be Dampfang's, and they hadn't yet been obscured by the still falling snow, which meant they were fresh.

"Cedarpaw must be close," Frostmask whispered around the mice dangling from her mouth.

Not needing to rely on Lizardpaw's tracking anymore, Frostmask and Pineshade crept forward in unconscious agreement to put Lizardpaw in the relatively safer position between the two of them as they followed Cedarpaw's trail.

Frostmask inhaled deeply. She could finally smell Cedarpaw's scent-trail through the smells of snow and rats. It was a miracle that Lizardpaw had been able to pick it up at all back in the forest and get them so close.

Frostmask jolted as another cry echoed through the storm, this time much louder and clearer than before.

"Help!" Cedarpaw wailed.

Frostmask and Pineshade surged forward toward the voice, and Lizardpaw jerkily followed, shooting them a confused look.

"Cedarpaw— calling— for help." Frostmask panted, hoping that Lizardpaw could read her lips around the mice dangling from her jaws well enough as they ran.

She didn't want to waste time by slowing and using her paws to sign when Cedarpaw's life could be hanging in the balance. But, Lizardpaw gave a firm nod, and his blue gaze darkened as if he understood.

Pineshade was in the lead, but as she rounded the corner of one of the piles, she suddenly slammed to a stop and started back-pedaling back behind the pile. Frostmask scrambled her paws against the snow to try to slow herself, but she still crashed into Pineshade's flanks, unable to completely halt in time. Frostmask hissed out a

breath at the new bruises, but Pineshade shot her a look with amber eyes round with fear as she frantically signed at Frostmask and Lizardpaw to be quiet.

Frostmask felt the fur on shoulders rise at the unsettling expression on Pineshade's face while the three of them grouped tightly together in the shelter of the pile. Frostmask shot a glance over her shoulder to make sure Lizardpaw was still behind them. He was watching her and Pineshade with wide eyes. Frostmask dropped the mice in her mouth to the ground and crept over to the edge of the pile to see what had so badly spooked Pineshade.

Frostmask carefully peeked around the corner and swallowed hard, her stomach suddenly turning nauseatingly. Several fox-lengths away, there was a sea of rats swarming at the base of a junk pile.

They were all thin— Frostmask could see ribs poking out of dingy brown and black pelts, but their skinny frames were taunt with energy. The rats clambered over each other, occasionally letting out a furious squeak and nipping at each other when one of them stepped on the other's paws or tail.

What are they doing here? Why are they so agitated?

Frostmask's questions were answered when she saw one rat break away from the others to climb up the side pile they were all clustered around. The rat's dark eyes glinted as it scrambled about half-way up the pile, pausing just beneath a crevice in the snow and two-leg items. It seemed to hesitate for a moment, before lunging forward with a fierce squeak. A dark tabby paw flashed out of the crevice to meet it. The rat shrieked as it was clawed down its side, blood dripping onto snow, then it was knocked off the pile by another hit of the paw. It tumbled down the little hill towards the crowd of starving rats below.

The rats' squeaks seemed to reach a fevered pitch when their bloodied companion fell into the crowd. Mounting horror grew in Frostmask's belly as the rats descend on the wounded one, drawn in by the scents of blood and weakness.

The wounded rat shrieked as its companions ate it alive.

Red spurted across the white ground as the rats sunk sharp, yellow teeth into its sides, pulling off its legs and tail. The rats squeaked and hissed at each other as each of them rushed in to get a mouthful, fighting one another for every bite.

In a matter of moments, there were only scraps of fur and blood left. Even the bones were gone. Some rats had snatched them up quickly, then fled from the group with their prizes clutched in their jaws— stealing them away to crack them open and eat the marrow in peace.

The squeaks quieted and the rats settled back into the churning sea that Frostmask had first seen them as; only squeaking occasionally when bothered. Frostmask realized they were patiently waiting for another rat to try their luck and fail, or for a rat to succeed and drag the cat out so they could have a bigger meal.

Frostmask slipped back around the corner of the pile, her muscles taunt with terror. She turned to look at Pineshade and Lizardpaw. Judging by their unnerved expressions, they had just witnessed the same baseless savagery that she had.

"How do we get Cedarpaw out?" Frostmask whispered, her eyes round with fear. "He's surrounded. He'll be eaten alive as soon as he sticks out even a whisker."

Lizardpaw just shook his head, looking like he felt ill to his stomach. Even Pineshade seemed like she was at a loss for words as her tail flicked with nervous energy. Frostmask was distracted from them when she saw a shadow flash between the piles behind Pineshade and Lizardpaw. Frostmask tensed, preparing herself to leap forward and fight a rat, but she realized the shape was distinctly feline.

Dampfang noticed them at the same time Frostmask noticed him, and he hurried over to the group.

"Have you found Cedarpaw?" he whispered.

Pineshade nodded.

"He's over there," she whispered, flicking her tail to indicate the direction. "But, he's trapped in a little cave and surrounded by tons of cannibal rats."

"Cannibal rats?" Dampfang echoed incredulously.

Pineshade nodded, her face grim.

"We just saw them kill and eat one of their own," she meowed. "Poke your head around to take a look. But, be careful that they don't see you. Cedarpaw's in a crevice about half-way up the pile."

Dampfang edged forward, peering around the corner for a moment before slipping back.

"Should we try to fight them?" he whispered.

"And get eaten alive?!" Frostmask hissed incredulously, lashing her tail.

Dampfang narrowed his harsh green gaze at her.

"Well I'm not leaving my apprentice to die, mouse-heart," he growled.

"Of course I'm not abandoning Cedarpaw, but we need to be smart so we *all* don't die," Frostmask growled back, having no patience left for him. "Besides, Cedarpaw wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for you being a frog-brain. So, maybe you should let someone else come up with the plans."

Dampfang bared his fangs at Frostmask.

"Enough," Pineshade hissed, glaring at the both of them. "The longer we argue, the greater the chances that the rats find us, or get impatient and overrun Cedarpaw!"

Frostmask twitched her tail, but she knew Pineshade was right. She inhaled deeply through her nose, trying to push her annoyance at Dampfang away so she could think.

"I agree that fighting's not a good idea," Pineshade murmured,

continuing. "Three warriors and two apprentices stand no chance against that many rats. What we need to do is get the rats away from the pile so Cedarpaw can escape."

"A distraction," Frostmask meowed, nodding in agreement.

"Can we try to scare them off?" Dampfang suggested.

Frostmask's gaze flickered to the ground, where it lingered on the two mice lying in the snow next to her, and she felt an idea forming in her mind.

"No," she meowed. "Let's give them what they want: fresh-kill."

She bent over and nudged the mice closer to them.

"We can lure them away with this," she meowed.

Dampfang glared at her skeptically.

"Two tiny mice for all those rats?" he said.

Frostmask shook her head.

"The mice will be just to get their attention," she meowed. "The real prize will be a big, tasty cat."

Pineshade and Dampfang stared at her.

"You want one of us to lure them away?" Pineshade said slowly.

Frostmask's tail-twitched, her stomach turning. Admittedly, it would be quite risky.

"Yes," she said. "It'll be dangerous, but does anyone else have a better idea?"

Her question was met with silence.

"The rats went crazy at the scent of blood," Frostmask continued. "Whoever does it can rub some mouse blood on themself to make them smell more appealing. They should first get the rats' attention, then run away and drop a mouse behind them to whet their

appetites. If the rats give chase and catch up to them while they're trying to escape the Carrionplace, they can drop the second mouse to distract the rats again and buy themself more time... Hopefully the rats will see them as an easier meal than Cedarpaw."

Pineshade nodded.

"It's a good idea," she meowed softly. "I'm faster than you, Frostmask. I'll do it."

"No!" Dampfang interrupted quickly, staring at Pineshade. "No. I'll do it."

Pineshade's brow furrowed, and her tail tip twitched.

"I'm faster than you too. I'll be fine," she insisted, but Dampfang just shook his head.

"I'm not taking that chance," he said stubbornly. "You make sure Cedarpaw's okay. Give me these—"

Dampfang snatched the mice up quickly as if he was afraid Pineshade would try to take them before he could.

"You all head to the tear in the webbing where we came in from. I'll try to lead them in the opposite direction," he mumbled around the mice in his mouth.

Pineshade opened her mouth, but before she could say any more, Dampfang turned and quickly slipped off. Pineshade gave her tail a few annoyed lashes.

"He should've let me do it! What a frog-brain!" she hissed in the direction he left.

Frostmask shrugged.

"I know he is. I've been saying that for moons, but you never listen to me," Frostmask meowed.

Pineshade glared at her.

"Not helping right now, Frostmask," Pineshade huffed.

Frostmask glanced away from her.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Come on," Pineshade said. "Let's see if the rats take the bait."

Pineshade, Frostmask, and Lizardpaw crept forward to peek their gazes around the side of the pile.

For several long moments, everything was as Frostmask had last seen it— the rats swarming around, squeaking occasionally, waiting for something to happen. But, then a rat at the edge of the group lifted its wedge-shaped muzzle to the air, its whiskers quivering with curiosity.

Rounding the edge of the pile where Cedarpaw was hiding, was Dampfang. He had followed Frostmask's suggestion to rub the mouse blood in his fur, but it wasn't a very convincing appearance of injury. The blood had congealed into a dark substance with tree sap-like consistency, and the amount he had managed to get from the mouse was barely a splatter on his pelt. But, Dampfang was still playing up his act as best he could. He was faking a limp and his head was bowed as he panted in mock exhaustion around the two, now quite mangled, mice that hung from his jaws.

A ripple of interest passed through the rat mob as eerie silence fell over them. They edged over in Dampfang's direction, a few brave ones on the edges of the crowd darting forward, closer to him for a moment, before ducking back into the safety of the group.

Frostmask found herself holding her breath in anticipation.

Come on. Go after him. She silently urged the rats.

Despite Dampfang's appearance of weakness, his green eyes were sharp and quick as they darted from rat to rat as the mob drew closer to him. His tail began to flick and his dark pelt prickled, but Frostmask couldn't tell if the indication of fear was genuine or another part of his act.

One rat, a big black brute, struck first.

It charged at Dampfang, its long yellow teeth bared, but Dampfang knocked it aside with a lightning fast strike of his paw. A surge of worry shot through Frostmask.

What's he doing!? He's supposed to run, not fight! The idiot will be eaten alive!

But, Dampfang's plan seemed to have a whisker of merit to it, since the attack just worked to entice the rats to go after him even more. The silence broke as a sharp chorus of harsh squeaks rose up from them as they dashed forward.

Now Dampfang did turn tail and flee, his paws kicking up snow behind him. After he led the rats a few boulder-lengths away from the pile, he dropped the first mouse behind him, which a few rats snatched up as the rest doggedly pursued Dampfang. A heartbeat later, Dampfang had disappeared around one of the many two-leg's piles, the rats hot behind him.

"Let's go," Pineshade hissed with a signal of her tail, wasting no time in hurrying towards Cedarpaw's hiding spot as soon as the rats were out of sight.

Frostmask dashed after her with Lizardpaw only a step behind. They ran to the pile and quickly scrambled up the side. Frostmask hissed as her paw struck something sharp in the pile beneath the snow, cutting her pad.

"Cedarpaw!" Pineshade hissed.

The apprentice's dark tabby head warily poked out of the little crevice, his gaze narrowed in fear, but when he spotted them, his eyes went wide with a powerful relief.

"Oh StarClan, you found me," he gasped, his voice wavering.

"All thanks to Lizardpaw," Frostmask meowed quietly. "He tracked you down."

"Thank you," Cedarpaw said, in addition to blinking his thanks in

sign to Lizardpaw, as he pulled himself out of the hole.

Once he emerged into the light, Frostmask could clearly see that the rats hadn't left him completely unharmed. His forepaws and shoulders especially were marred with bites and one eye was swollen up from a scrape to his cheek. Thankfully no bite seemed too deep, but they'd have to get him back to Clearstream and Elmclaw quickly so infection didn't set in.

Pineshade peered at Cedarpaw's cuts worriedly as the four of them skidded back down the side of the snowy pile.

"Can you run? We need to get out of here as fast as we can," she meowed in a hushed voice.

Cedarpaw put on a brave face and nodded.

"Stay absolutely quiet, and you and Lizardpaw stay between us," Pineshade whispered, flicking her tail to indicate herself and Frostmask. "Come on."

The four of them took off at as fast a pace Cedarpaw could manage. Frostmask kept her ears pricked, wary for the rats as they sprinted through the Carrionplace, but the storm which had been working against them when they were tracking Cedarpaw down, now worked with them to disguise their presence. Frostmask didn't even see a flick of a furless tail.

A surge of relief shook Frostmask as the silver webbing came into sight. Frostmask slowed as they reached it, keeping watch over her shoulder for rats and letting everyone else go first through the tear in the webbing. Once Pineshade's dark tail was through, Frostmask followed them. As Frostmask cleared the bit of distance between the webbing and the tree-line, she sighed so deeply her bones shuddered. She felt like she had never been so grateful to be back in the forest.

As Frostmask trotted back under the safety of the pines, Cricketpaw came barreling over to Cedarpaw, her eyes wide with relief.

"You're alright!" she gasped, running to his side and starting to lick

at her brother's wounds.

Cedarpaw winced as her tongue scraped his raw cuts.

"Where's Dampfang?" he meowed, glancing around.

Frostmask saw Pineshade's gaze darken with worry.

"He lured the rats away from the pile. Hopefully he'll be back soon," Pineshade murmured.

Frostmask's tail twitched as she glanced back at the Carrionplace, hoping to see a flash of Dampfang's dark pelt through the snow. She might not like the cat, but being eaten alive by rats was a fate that Frostmask wouldn't wish on anyone. Not spotting his black pelt yet, Frostmask looked back over at the group, and she saw Pineshade's brow furrowing.

"Why did you go into the Carrionplace?" Pineshade asked Cedarpaw, an undercurrent of anger entering her voice. "Didn't Dampfang tell you it was dangerous?"

Cedarpaw dipped his head in shame.

"Yeah," he muttered. "But, he also said that Sedgestar sometimes allows hunting there when there's no prey to be found in the forest... I got a bit lost during my hunt, and I bumped into it. I hadn't found any prey yet, so I thought..."

"No one is to enter the Carrionplace without Sedgestar's permission." Pineshade's voice was stern. "You could've been killed, and you put our whole patrol at risk."

Cedarpaw bowed his head deeper, his ears flattening.

Frostmask's tail flicked. She felt like she had to come to Cedarpaw's defense.

"Cedarpaw's one day out of the nursery," Frostmask meowed in a low voice that only reached Pineshade's ears. "We can't really expect him to know any better... Dampfang should've been more clear about the Carrionplace being forbidden. Cedarpaw shouldn't even

been hunting alone... I *know* you know that it was a frog-brained idea, Pineshade."

Pineshade glared at Frostmask, the fur on her shoulders bristling slightly. She jerked her head to the side, indicating Frostmask to follow her a few tail-lengths away from the apprentices, out of their earshot. Frostmask did so reluctantly, her muscles tensing in anticipation of an argument.

"Stop blaming Dampfang for everything," Pineshade hissed at her. "You're acting like this mess is all his fault."

Frostmask's jaw fell open in shock, and she completely forgot about how she was supposed to be not making the rift between her and Pineshade worse.

"Uh— but it is?!" Frostmask said, her tail starting to lash. "If he didn't send Cedarpaw out alone, Cedarpaw wouldn't've ended up here!"

"Well it wouldn't've happened either, if you weren't so eager to have this dumb contest with Cedarpaw and Lizardpaw," Pineshade snapped back.

"Dampfang started that too!" Frostmask gasped indignantly. "And, like a heartbeat afterwards, I realized it was a dumb idea and told Dampfang to call it off!"

Frostmask's lip curled up as her frustration grew.

How could she make Pineshade see sense?! For such a clever cat, she always had such a big blindspot when it came to Dampfang.

"Stop defending him when he's clearly in the wrong," Frostmask hissed.

"I'm not saying he didn't mess up at all," Pineshade grumbled, her tail twitching. "But, he didn't cause *everything.* I mean, he helped us save Cedarpaw too. He lured the rats away."

Frostmask snorted derisively.

"Yeah, after he insisted that you weren't capable when you volunteered to do it," Frostmask said, unable to keep the contempt from her voice. *"What a hero."*

Pineshade glared at Frostmask.

"He just wanted me to be safe," she spat, lashing her tail. "That's what cats that care about each other do."

Frostmask pinned her ears against her head.

"Well I care about you too!" Frostmask snapped. "But, I know you're a competent cat that can handle herself! And, I believe you when you tell me you can do something!"

Pineshade just stared at Frostmask, having no retort back. But, Frostmask jerked and broke eye-contact as the sound of paw-steps interrupted their argument. Frostmask turned to see Dampfang appear, panting slightly from his run, but looking no worse for wear. Dampfang strode up to Cedarpaw as soon as he spotted him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, inspecting Cedarpaw's wounds.

Cedarpaw nodded.

Pineshade brushed past Frostmask, heading over to Dampfang where she bumped his shoulder with her head affectionately.

"I'm glad you made it out," Pineshade mewed in a quiet voice.

"There was a lot of them, but they couldn't climb the silver webbing after me," Dampfang meowed, giving his dark fur a brisk shake. "We should get going though, in case they decide to do a border patrol around the Carrionplace and spot us and the hole in the web."

Pineshade nodded in agreement.

"We should go back to camp," she said. "Sedgestar needs to know what happened, and Cedarpaw needs his wounds looked at."

Dampfang glanced at Cedarpaw.

"Did you manage to catch any prey?" he meowed.

"No," Cedarpaw muttered, his tail-tip twitching.

"That's alright," Dampfang meowed offhandedly. "Lizardpaw caught two mice, but they were lost, so we can call it a tie."

Frostmask felt the fur down her back rise.

Of course Dampfang still cares about that! For StarClan's sake, Lizardpaw's mice were used to save Cedarpaw! That's more important than any dumb competition!

Dampfang cast Frostmask a look, his green gaze taunting. She realized that he was provoking her. He *wanted* her to argue with him, but Frostmask wasn't going to give him that satisfaction.

Frostmask rose to her paws, her gaze icy as she stared at Dampfang. She glanced at Pineshade, but she was still gazing at the dark tom. Frostmask turned and used her tail to signal for Lizardpaw to follow as she silently padded into the forest, leaving Dampfang, Cedarpaw, Cricketpaw and Pineshade behind.

Conversations

Frostmask headed back towards camp with Lizardpaw walking at her shoulder. Her jaw was clenched in silent frustration towards Pineshade and Dampfang, but the edge of her bad mood was softened by the fact that it had finally stopped snowing. Although, the forest around the two cats was still coated in a substantial layer of it, so it'd clearly be sticking around for a while.

'You okay?' Lizardpaw asked her, for the second time today.

Frostmask sighed, and she paused walking.

'Dampfang's a jerk,' Frostmask signed. *'I don't like him. And, I wish he didn't spend so much time with Pineshade because it'd be a lot easier for me to ignore him then...'*

Lizardpaw nodded, his brow furrowed. Frostmask gave her head a sharp shake to try to pull herself from her brooding. Although it was nice to feel like Lizardpaw was on her side, he was still her apprentice, not her peer. Her job was to mentor and train him. It felt a bit improper to wrap him up in her drama with Pineshade and Dampfang. She nudged Lizardpaw's shoulder with her muzzle, deciding to change the subject.

'You were amazing back there,' she signed. *'No other cat in ShadowClan could track Cedarpaw down like you did. You saved his life! I'm really proud of you.'*

Lizardpaw ducked his head shyly, but his blue eyes were bright with pleasure. Frostmask purred, feeling a warm glow of affection in her chest.

'I'll make sure Sedgestar knows about what you did today,' she continued.

They started walking again and soon reached the thorn barrier. Pushing through the tunnel, Frostmask was greeted by the

reassuringly familiar sight of the ShadowClan camp at sun-high. Some cats had crept out of their dens now that the snowfall had stopped, and they were either eating or quietly working in camp. Frostmask noticed Featherpaw and Yewpaw were busy shoving snow away from the holly bush to clear the entrance to the apprentices' den. Larkfoot and Amberberry were by the elders' den, a massive stump of a long-gone pine tree, and they were weaving branches between gaps in the roots and shoving in moss plastered with mud to seal the chill and the snow out of the den. Greytail stuck her head out of the den's entrance, blinking at the she-cats gratefully.

"There's still a draft coming in from the back," the elder rasped.

Larkfoot nodded and snatched up another muddy moss patch, padding around the stump.

Frostmask glanced towards the nursery, feeling a flash of surprise that the queens were reinforcing the elders' den rather than the bramble bush, but she blinked when she realized that now that Cricketpaw, Cedarpaw, Buzzardpaw, and Hollowpaw were apprentices, for the first time in Frostmask's life, there were no kits in ShadowClan.

Frostmask's tail-tip twitched uneasily at the thought. As far as she knew, no she-cat was expecting right now either... Maybe it was for the best. Leaf-bare had only just begun, and fresh-kill was already getting harder and harder to find. It wasn't a good time to be having kits.

As if to emphasize Frostmask's gloomy sentiment, Dawntail started coughing as she was eating a black-bird with Dustleap a few tail-lengths away from the entrance to the medicine cats' den. Elmclaw emerged, drawn out by the sound. He padded over to her, but Dawntail just waved him away with her tail.

"I only swallowed a feather," she meowed around her coughs.

Elmclaw relented and padded back into his cave, but Frostmask's felt worry swirling in her belly. Hopefully it *was* just a feather, and Dawntail wasn't getting sick like her kits.

Frostmask turned to Lizardpaw, giving him a nod to dismiss him from duties for the sun-high. He padded off towards his siblings, his tail perking up high in greeting to them. Frostmask took a few steps in the direction of Sedgestar's den, but she paused for a moment to watch Lizardpaw, Featherpaw, and Yewpaw together. Featherpaw's and Yewpaw's diligent clearing of the apprentices' den's entrance had turned from work to play when their brother joined them, and now the three of them were pouncing on little mounds of snow and throwing the powder up into the air with their paws.

*Today's the first day they've ever **seen** snow.* Frostmask realized with a blink.

It was a bit of a strange thought. The snow and the cold seemed to be something so ingrained into Frostmask's life and her memories, it was odd to imagine that for some cats, today was their first experience with it. Sometimes Frostmask felt like winter, for all its cruelty and death, was what had given her her life. To take it away from her, would be like changing her pelt color or turning her plumy tail into a stub.

Frostmask gave her head a small, melancholy shake. Things really would've been so different for her if today was the first time she'd seen snow. If leaf-bare had not killed them, she'd still have a mother and two siblings. Would she even still be named Frost if the world hadn't been frozen solid the day she was born? She'd have a whole different *identity*.

I wouldn't be in ShadowClan. May only sought shelter here because we were starving from leaf-bare.

Frostmask felt herself tense.

...Would she make that trade if she could? Get her mother back and her brothers, the four of them living together as loners, in trade for all the cats she'd come to know here and all the hardships she'd faced in ShadowClan? When she was a kit, she knew what her answer would be, quite easily, but now it was much more difficult question.

Frostmask glanced around the clearing for a moment before her

gaze settled back down on Lizardpaw and his siblings. Watching them tumbling around together made the tightness her heart ease.

I couldn't.

Frostmask relaxed as the thought rang certainly in her mind. Although she'd experienced many terrible things here, losing her mother, growing up as an outcast, losing Swoopstrike... she didn't want to leave ShadowClan. She had just as many, if not more good things here too. She wanted the cats she lost back, but she wasn't going to give up all of things that she had now for them.

Frostmask felt a pang at that thought.

I'm sorry, she whispered the words to the ghosts in her mind.

She gave her ears a small shake to clear her head.

There's no sense in thinking that way anyway. They aren't coming back... I don't have to feel guilty that I wouldn't trade everything else here for them.

Frostmask heard Grovepelt's words echoing in her ears again.

"They wouldn't want you to live the rest of your life in misery."

I'm trying not to, she thought back to herself.

Frostmask gave a soft sigh as she realized that she had completely failed to have any meaningful conversation with Pineshade during her patrol. She would have to deal with her later. Frostmask blinked and pulled herself back to the present moment. She watched Lizardpaw rolling around in the snow for a heartbeat longer, a soft purr in her throat before she turned and padded towards the entrance to Sedgestar's den at the base of the Oak Tree. She could pick up his scent wafting strongly out the roots.

"Sedgestar?" she called. "Can I speak with you?"

"Frostmask?" Sedgestar's voice, rough with sleep replied. "Come in."

Frostmask padded into the earthen tunnel, murmuring a pleased

sigh that it was much warmer inside than out in the snow. Once she entered into the dimly lit den, she saw both Sedgestar and Emberflower in their nest. Sedgestar was sitting up, looking at her expectantly, but Emberflower was still curled into a ball by his side. Frostmask's tail flipped guiltily. She'd clearly interrupted their sun-high nap.

Frostmask dipped her head to them briefly. The events of her hectic patrol played out in her mind again, and she felt a moment of nervousness about what Sedgestar's reaction to it would be. But, she gave her head a small shake, making a snap decision to just get it over with and tell her leader everything.

"Some things happened while I was out on patrol that I thought you should know about," Frostmask said, speaking quickly. "When I was with Dampfang, Pineshade and our apprentices, Dampfang and I had a hunting competition with Lizardpaw and Cedarpaw. Dampfang sent Cedarpaw out alone, and he ended up in the Carrionplace. Thanks to Lizardpaw, we were able to track his scent, and rescue him from a group of rats which had trapped him inside there. Although Cedarpaw sustained some relatively minor injuries, which he will need to see the medicine cats for. Lizardpaw is back in camp now, and the rest of them were just behind me, so they should be back soon as well."

Sedgestar nodded slowly, his expression unreadable as he absorbed everything she told him. Emberflower had raised her head from their nest, her gaze troubled. Sedgestar gave a sharp sigh when Frostmask finished her report.

"Agitating the rats is never a good idea," he said, his face turning weary. "We rely on the fragile truce which keeps them within the borders of the Carrionplace, as long as we stay out. There will be trouble for ShadowClan if they've been provoked to travel outside of their boundaries... Why exactly did Cedarpaw end up in there again?"

Frostmask shook her head.

"I'm not completely sure. But, I don't think he really knew any better," she meowed. "...I don't think he fully understood that

hunting in the Carrionplace was forbidden."

Sedgestar's tail-tip twitched slightly.

"I see," he said, his eyes unreadable. "Thank you for the report, Frostmask. You are dismissed, but please send Dampfang in once he gets to camp."

"I will," she murmured, but she didn't move to leave yet. "I also wanted to be sure that you knew how well Lizardpaw did today, though. Without his tracking abilities, I'm certain we wouldn't've been able to get to Cedarpaw in time."

Sedgestar nodded again and some of his stern expression softened.

"Very good," he meowed. "I'm sure that will help reassure some of our clan-mates that question his usefulness."

Frostmask's tail raised in pride for her apprentice. She dipped her head to Sedgestar again before turning and padding back out of the den. When Frostmask emerged, shivering at the cold that rushed back over her, she saw that the others still hadn't made it back to camp yet.

Frostmask wandered over into the center of the clearing, hesitating as she glanced around. She wasn't sure what to do with herself while she waited for Dampfang, Pineshade, and their apprentices to get back. It felt too cold to linger outside, just standing around. But, she wasn't sure that she wanted to go in the warriors' den either.

Her tail twitched uneasily.

What if Autumnleap is in there?

Frostmask sighed softly, wishing she could go back to a few moons ago, when she had plenty of cats to seek out to spend time with, instead of worrying about running into them.

"Hey, Frostmask." A voice interrupted her, and she turned to see Poolcloud padding over to her.

Frostmask raised her tail in greeting, feeling a rush of happiness at

the sight of him. He was one of the few uncomplicated, friendly faces she had left.

"Hey, what's up?" she meowed.

Poolcloud shrugged in his good-natured way.

"Nothing much," he meowed. "I wanted to come see how you're doing."

"Me?" Frostmask said, angling an ear at him questioningly.

Poolcloud scuffled his paws in the snow for a moment.

"Yeah," he said. "I mean, I know you and Pineshade aren't on great terms since Pineshade and... you know."

Poolcloud cleared his throat awkwardly like he didn't want to say Dampfang's name out loud, as if he was worried about upsetting her.

"Yeah," Frostmask admitted. "I was trying to make up with her today, but it didn't go exactly great... our patrol was kinda a disaster in fact."

Poolcloud pricked his ears in an expression of interest. Frostmask sighed.

"Dampfang showed up," she explained. "Cedarpaw got lost and ended up in the Carrionplace. He was injured by rats... Everyone is okay, but it was this whole thing."

Frostmask lashed her tail a few times in emphasis.

"...Well you know that Pineshade can be difficult," Poolcloud said. "But, I'm glad that you're making up."

"Trying to," Frostmask corrected with a bitter purr. "And, failing right now, but I'll attempt again later."

Poolcloud nodded before falling quiet for a moment, and he looked down at his paws.

"Anyway, I'm also worried about Autumnleap," he said, his tail twitching faintly, and Frostmask's stomach lurched at the sound of his name. "He's been not himself for the past few days, and I've seen you avoiding him..."

Frostmask's ears flattened guilty.

"So, I just wanted to make sure you're okay," Poolcloud continued, lifting his gaze to study her with concern.

"I'm okay..." Frostmask meowed slowly, even though she knew it wasn't totally true.

But, she grimaced at the thought of Poolcloud finding out that only a heartbeat before he appeared, she had been standing alone, feeling lost in their own camp... If Poolcloud knew that, it'd just make him fret about her like he was about Autumnleap right now, and Frostmask felt bad about worrying him.

Poolcloud glanced at her as if he didn't totally believe her, and Frostmask ducked her head.

"Kinda okay," she qualified.

"Autumnleap told me a bit about what happened," Poolcloud said in a soft voice.

Frostmask winced faintly, shutting her eyes for a moment.

"He did?" she meowed, dread in her voice.

Poolcloud nodded solemnly. Frostmask glanced at his face again, afraid to find anger towards her there for how badly she reacted to Autumnleap that day, but Poolcloud's expression was just sympathetic.

"I didn't mean to hurt his feelings," Frostmask whispered. "I just..."

Her voice trailed off, and she sighed. She didn't really want to get into the whole story right now. Poolcloud seemed to understand, so he just walked over to her so he could lean against her side, his long, dense fur enveloping her.

"You know, I'm here for you if you ever want to talk about anything," Poolcloud said.

He rumbled a quick purr.

"Or if you want to just hang out and not talk about anything," he said.

Frostmask pressed herself back against him and gave his shoulder fur a brief lick so he knew his words were appreciated.

"Thanks Poolcloud," she mewed.

Dampfang, Pineshade, Cedarpaw, and Cricketpaw entered through the thorn tunnel then, and Frostmask pulled away from Poolcloud. She shook her head, trying to dislodge her thoughts about Autumnleap.

"I have to go talk to them," she explained, nodding in Dampfang's and Pineshade's direction.

"Alright, I'll see you later," Poolcloud said, nodding in goodbye.

Frostmask turned away and strode over to Dampfang, Pineshade and their apprentices, her chin held up in what she hoped was a confident and collected expression.

"I gave Sedgestar the report," she said, locking her gaze on Dampfang. "He wants to speak with you, Dampfang."

Dampfang glanced at her, his eyes narrowing suspiciously, but when he spoke, he was icily polite.

"Of course. Thank you, Frostmask," he meowed, brushing past her to head towards Sedgestar's den.

"Cricketpaw, take Cedarpaw to the medicine cats' den, and then take a break for a while," Pineshade meowed to the apprentices. "Also, make sure you two tell Clearstream and Elmclaw that the injuries are rat bites. They'll need to know so they can treat them properly. And, you should get checked out yourself for your cough, Cricketpaw. I heard you wheezing a bit on the way back."

Cricketpaw and Cedarpaw nodded, their gazes glazed with exhaustion. They were propping each other by leaning their shoulders together, and they staggered side by side to the medicine cats' den. Even though they'd only been out for a half a day, Cricketpaw and Cedarpaw were clearly wiped out.

Well Cricketpaw was sick not that long ago. And, Cedarpaw was pretty chewed up by the rats... so they probably have good reason to be tired.

"Not the greatest first day out of camp," Frostmask thought out-loud, her gaze still on the apprentices.

She glanced at Pineshade to see if she'd agree, but the she-cat was silent. Frostmask's tail twitched.

She probably was still mad at Frostmask for arguing with her about Dampfang.

Frostmask huffed quietly to herself at the thought.

"What?" Pineshade snapped, the fur on her shoulders already rising defensively.

"I didn't say anything," Frostmask muttered, turning away from her.

Frostmask figured it was better to just walk away than to start another fight. She'd try again a different day to make up with Pineshade. A day when Dampfang wasn't around.

"But, I can tell you want to say something," Pineshade said, the snarl obvious in her voice. "You've already spent the past moon brooding on it. So, just spit it out, Frostmask."

Frostmask clenched her jaw, then turned to face her. Pineshade was glaring at her, her spiky black fur prickling.

Fine.

Pineshade wanted to hear her grievances? Then she'd tell her. But, not in front of all their clan-mates.

Frostmask jerked her chin towards the thorn tunnel and stalked out

of camp, leaving Pineshade to follow. Frostmask led them a ways away into the forest, until she could be reassured that no clan-mates back in camp would overhear them. Then she turned to Pineshade. Frostmask exhaled forcefully through her nose, trying to wrangle her emotions under control.

"Look, you know I don't like Dampfang," Frostmask said, doing her best to keep her voice level and calm despite the annoyance that smarted just beneath the surface. "Even ignoring all the frog-brained stuff that happened today, I don't think he's a good mate for you, and I don't even think he's a nice cat—"

"You don't know the side of him that I do," Pineshade snapped, and Frostmask's calm facade started to crumble.

"I just don't understand," Frostmask growled, attempting but failing to stifle the anger that boiled inside her. "Out of all the cats in the clan, why him? There are so many other *nicer* cats. Why did you have to pick the one that's tormented me the most out of anyone?! And, hasn't even ever apologized for it!"

Pineshade lashed her tail agitatedly. But, she looked more torn than angry.

"I'm sorry about what Dampfang's done to you," Pineshade said. "But, I told you that I'd do my best to make sure that he's never like that again. And, ultimately, the reason I'm with him has nothing to do with you."

"But, don't you care about me?" Frostmask snapped, her back arching defensively as she took a pace back from Pineshade.

Frostmask's eyes stung as she blinked hard at Pineshade. The subdued embers of hurt and anger now suddenly roared to life like a fire in her chest. A part of her hated how she was being right now. She knew she was losing control again, just like what had happened when she spoke to Autumnleap a few days ago. Her paws shook and her heart hammered in her ears, urging her to flee from the source of her distress. But, she dug her paws into the freezing snow, determined not to run away this time.

Pineshade stared at her, and her demeanor softened, the fur on her back flattening. Frostmask found her tension also easing some in response to Pineshade's deescalation.

"Of course I care about you, frog-brain," Pineshade murmured. "But, I also love Dampfang."

Pineshade's amber eyes were pleading like they were the first time she told Frostmask about Dampfang, asking for her to understand. Frostmask forced her posture to relax, loosening her taunt muscles with some difficulty. Frostmask stared down at the ground as the icy air around her cooled the anger in her chest.

"He doesn't deserve it," Frostmask muttered to the snow.

Pineshade didn't say anything in response, evidently knowing that there was nothing she could do to change Frostmask's mind on that front. Silence hung between them for a long few heartbeats as Frostmask tried to figure out what to say.

Grovepelt's right. There's room for more than one cat in someone's heart. I should try to act like it, instead of fighting with Dampfang over Pineshade like she's some kind of prize to be won.

Frostmask sighed heavily and all at once, the rest of her anger drained out of her.

"I spoke with Grovepelt this morning," Frostmask said in a low voice, glancing back up at Pineshade.

Pineshade angled an ear in her direction.

"Oh, you did?" she asked.

"Yeah," Frostmask said. "...He helped me see some sense."

"He has an infuriating way of doing that," Pineshade said drily.

A soft purr rose in Frostmask's throat, one that Pineshade echoed, and the tension between them began melting away like snow in warm sunlight.

"I'm sorry for how I've been ignoring you," Frostmask meowed, blinking at her. "I still don't agree with you being with Dampfang... but I care about you too. And, I want to be your friend. As long as I didn't already ruin that by being a badger for the past moon."

Pineshade shook her head.

"You didn't ruin anything, frog-brain," she meowed. "I know it must've come as a shock to you."

Frostmask sighed.

"Honestly, I don't know if I'll ever understand it," she admitted.

Pineshade took a few paces closer so she could stand by Frostmask's side.

"Then I won't try to convince you," Pineshade said in a quiet voice. "If you don't want me too."

Frostmask nodded, and Pineshade cast her a glance out of the corner of her eye.

"And, I won't try to make you forgive him either," she murmured.

"...Thank you," Frostmask sighed softly.

Pineshade arched a brow at her, her expression becoming more light-hearted.

"And, I propose we should try to limit the time all of us patrol together too," Pineshade said with a wry twitch of her whiskers.

Frostmask purred in response.

"That I can definitely agree with," she meowed.

Frostmask felt lighter than she had in a while as the two of them began to pad back towards camp, walking side by side. It was as if she'd been walking on a thorn in her pad for the past moon, and she finally had dug it out. Maybe the wound hadn't completely sealed over yet, but at least now it was beginning to heal.

"Okay, well now that we've agreed that we're friends again," Pineshade said and Frostmask purred quietly at the playfulness in her voice. "I'm dying to know: what's up with Autumnleap? For the past few days, he's been going around looking like someone's put mouse-bile in his water. But, the frog-brain won't *tell me* what's wrong when I ask him, of course."

Frostmask jerked in surprise at the sudden mention of Autumnleap and stumbled over her own paws in what was probably the most obviously suspicious manner possible. Pineshade stopped walking to stare at Frostmask. Her black-furred tail started to twitch in badly contained excitement.

"Oh, you *know* something don't you?" Pineshade meowed.

"I- I-" Frostmask tripped over her tongue as embarrassed heat rose to her ears.

Pineshade started to purr in amusement, which just made Frostmask's pelt warm more.

"This must be *good!"* Pineshade's amber eyes shone with eagerness as if she was dying to know what piece of juicy gossip Frostmask had on Autumnleap. "Come on! Tell me!"

Frostmask groaned, dipping her chin to rasp her tongue over her chest fur in a futile attempt to quell her embarrassment.

What do I do?

Pineshade had already figured out that Frostmask knew what happened, so there was no use lying to her. Frostmask could tell her that she didn't want to talk about it, but that'd just be delaying the inevitable. Pineshade was obviously very curious, and Frostmask knew that she was an easier target for Pineshade than Autumnleap. So knowing the determined she-cat, Pineshade would just relentlessly needle Frostmask until she caved. Telling her now seemed like the less-painful option.

...Maybe it actually wouldn't be so bad. Although Pineshade certainly couldn't offer the warm support Poolcloud could, she was

analytical and clever. Maybe Pineshade even had some insight into the situation which Frostmask had missed.

"Well?" Pineshade prompted, her tail flicking from side to side behind her.

"It's horribly embarrassing," Frostmask meowed in a low voice. "But, not for who you think."

Pineshade tilted her head to the side, considering.

"...You?" Pineshade said slowly.

"Yes," Frostmask admitted.

Pineshade's eyes stretched wide.

"What happened?" she demanded.

Frostmask sighed heavily and padded over to the shelter of a nearby spruce tree to take a seat on ground that wasn't covered in snow. Pineshade mirrored her, her curious gaze never wavering from Frostmask's face.

"We got into a fight," she muttered.

Pineshade blinked in surprise.

"You two never fight," she meowed.

"There's a first time for everything," Frostmask said with bitter humor.

Pineshade tilted her head to the side again.

"I did notice that you and him didn't seem to be spending much time together recently," Pineshade meowed. "But, I wasn't sure if I was imagining it."

"We've hardly talked in days," Frostmask admitted.

Pineshade's already wide eyes went as round as moons.

"That's serious," she said.

Frostmask nodded grimly, giving a reluctant sigh. She braced herself. She had to tell Pineshade the full story.

"What happened was..." Frostmask mewed haltingly. "Well... he told me that he loved me, and I got overwhelmed and ran away from him."

For a heartbeat, Pineshade just stared at her in silence as Frostmask's words sunk in.

"Everything's ruined," Frostmask sighed.

"Oh is that all?" Pineshade meowed at the same time.

Frostmask blinked at Pineshade in confusion.

"What?" she meowed. "What do you mean?"

Pineshade's brow furrowed.

"I was expecting something much worse," Pineshade said, giving a dismissive tail-flick. "You've just bruised his ego a bit. He'll get over it."

"I ran away from him," Frostmask emphasized, staring at her in bewilderment.

"Not the best choice in response," Pineshade admitted. "But, the situation just doesn't really seem like that big of a deal? What I'm most surprised about is that you two haven't talked about something like this sooner. I mean, given the way he's been mooning after you for seasons."

Frostmask felt her fur flush with heat again.

"I didn't know that," she muttered, staring down at her paws.

Pineshade purred in amusement.

"You had no idea?" Pineshade meowed. "Autumnleap isn't like

exactly the *most* subtle cat in the forest."

Frostmask felt her pelt growing even warmer at Pineshade's teasing.

"Maybe I suspected something, towards the end," Frostmask said. "But, I didn't, I guess, think the confession would be so... *abrupt."*

Pineshade arched a brow at her.

"Was it abrupt though?" she meowed. "I mean, clearly you weren't picking up on any of the hints, so what other choice did he have but to tell you? If you were just a little less oblivious—"

"Pineshade!" Frostmask complained. "Not helping!"

Pineshade rolled her eyes but gave a brief purr.

"Alright, I'll stop," Pineshade meowed.

She prodded Frostmask's side with her paw playfully.

"You just make teasing you so easy," Pineshade purred.

Frostmask swatted Pineshade's paw away, but the movement wasn't angry.

"But, it's a serious situation!" Frostmask meowed. "I'm worried that he doesn't want anything to do with me! I feel like our friendship is ruined..."

Pineshade's tail twitched as she thought.

"He probably just needs more time," she meowed after a few heartbeats of silence. "I don't think you've ruined your friendship. I mean, I'm sure his feelings might still be a bit hurt, but Autumnleap acts like you personally put the sun and the moon in the sky. He's not gonna stop thinking that just because of this argument."

Frostmask ducked her head at the unexpectedly sweet comment from Pineshade.

"Besides, if Autumnleap and I can still mostly get along after all the

snake-dung that we've done to each other in the past," Pineshade continued with a shrug. "Then you two will definitely be able to make up."

Frostmask nervously kneaded her claws into the hard ground.

"But, it's more than an argument," Frostmask murmured. "He was being vulnerable with me and I... I..."

"Ripped his exposed underbelly open?" Pineshade suggested, her eyes gleaming with dark humor.

Frostmask stared at her, aghast.

"That's terrible!" Frostmask gasped, the mental image of Autumnleap's wounded stomach after the SkyClan battle appearing in her mind.

"Stabbed him in the heart?" Pineshade amended, titling her head.

"Pineshade!" Frostmask said, widening her eyes at her.

"Have you talked to him about what happened?" Pineshade briskly continued on, ignoring her.

Frostmask's tail twitched.

"I apologized for running away from him," Frostmask meowed softly. "But, we didn't really talk about the conversation itself... honestly I've kinda been avoiding him because it's just really awkward, and I'm really embarrassed."

Pineshade arched a brow at her, her expression somehow amused, bemused, and pitying at the same time. It was as if Pineshade was watching a snake bite at its own side rather than the piece of fresh-kill in front of it— wondering if she should intervene and try to help the poor creature, or if she should just watch the entertaining self-inflicted tragedy unfold.

"What?" Frostmask meowed defensively.

Pineshade gave the most exaggerated eye roll that Frostmask had

ever seen, but managed to hold in the taunts that clearly sat on the tip of her tongue.

"Maybe the solution is to actually talk with him about the conversation and your feelings?" Pineshade said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I mean, how *do* you feel about him? Do you like him as more than a friend?"

Frostmask scuffled her paws on the ground, not making eye-contact with Pineshade.

"I'm not sure," she mumbled. "Everything is so *confusing*. I feel like I never really thought about him that way before... back when I was oblivious I mean. And, now I don't know... But, I don't feel like I want a mate right now. I just want things to be like they were before. I want things to be normal."

"Then tell him that," Pineshade said with a flick of her tail.

Frostmask flipped her tail worriedly as a line from her conversation with Autumnleap came back to her: her asking him why things couldn't be normal, and him telling her that he couldn't go on like that.

Frostmask looked at Pineshade.

"He won't like hearing that," Frostmask murmured.

"Okay, sure," Pineshade said, waving her tail dismissively. "But, it's tons better than running away from him and then barely speaking to him. I mean, since you've been avoiding him, he's probably got his tail twisted into a dozen knots, worried that you hate him now because he confessed to you."

Frostmask felt a heavy weight drop down into her stomach, and her eyes widened.

"Oh," she breathed in a soft voice. "I hadn't thought about that."

Pineshade snorted with amusement.

"Of course you didn't, frog-brain," she said, her amber eyes glinting

as if she couldn't resist the final jab. "So, you've got nowhere to go but up."

Among the Ice

Frostmask's tail flicked with nervousness as she sought out Autumnleap later that evening. Her gaze scanned across the camp, searching for his auburn pelt, but instead, her eyes first found two black pelts eating prey close to the fresh-kill pile. Dampfang lifted his head from the mouse he was sharing with Pineshade like he had felt Frostmask's gaze brush over him. He shot her a sour look, and the fur on the back of Frostmask's neck prickled. She wasn't exactly sure what Sedgestar told Dampfang when they talked earlier about the Carrionplace incident. But if Dampfang's acrid look was any indication, he must have been harshly scolded in the very least.

Frostmask glanced away, breaking the eye contact first as to not provoke him. Knowing Dampfang, he probably blamed Frostmask for whatever trouble he got in with Sedgestar. And, Frostmask and Pineshade just made up... so she should try not to be hostile.

Her eyes then finished their patrol around the camp, finally spotting Autumnleap hidden in the long shadows cast from Clanrock.

Her feud with Dampfang immediately forgotten, Frostmask's heart began to thump in her ears. A powerful urge to avoid him tugged at her paws, but Frostmask took a deep breath to steady herself and then made her feet walk in his direction.

Her paws squelched in the cold slush as she crossed the camp. After the snowfall had stopped earlier that day, it had warmed up enough to start melting the top layer of snow. But, now that the sun hung low in the sky, the temperature was dropping again, and Frostmask knew the slush would be frozen over and slick ice under her paws soon enough.

When she made it to the base of Clanrock, Frostmask stopped a few tail-lengths away from Autumnleap and waited for him to glance over at her.

"Er— hey," Frostmask said, her voice an awkward high-pitched

squeak when he looked at her.

Autumnleap's gaze flickered away.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"I'm taking Lizardpaw to the Burnt Sycamore for some battle training, do you want to come with me?" Frostmask asked, forcing the words out quickly.

Autumnleap's brow furrowed slightly.

"Shouldn't you ask someone who also has an apprentice?" he said after a pause. "Like Pineshade?"

Frostmask flicked her tail with nervous energy.

"But, I want you to come," she murmured. "I'm sure Lizardpaw would be happy to show you his progress. And, besides... I want to talk to you."

After another moment of hesitation, Autumnleap nodded slowly, and he rose to his paws.

"Thanks," Frostmask breathed. "Let me just go get Lizardpaw."

Frostmask fetched Lizardpaw from the apprentice's den, and when she emerged from the holly bush, she saw Autumnleap already waiting for them by the thorn tunnel. Frostmask padded over to him, before signaling for Lizardpaw to take the lead as the three of them headed into the forest.

Frostmask was silent for the first part of the walk to the Burnt Sycamore, working up the nerve to talk to Autumnleap. Lizardpaw trotted along a few tail-lengths in front of her, but he clearly sensed something was up because he kept casting curious glances back at them from over his shoulder.

Frostmask tilted her chin up to study the intricate network of pine needles in the canopy overhead for a moment before glancing back down and watching a stray, withered sycamore leaf scurry across the snowy slush— content at looking anywhere else but at

Autumnleap's face. A part of Frostmask wished that he would start the conversation so that she didn't have to. But, she knew that she was the one that invited him here, so it made sense that she was the one that started the talk...

Frostmask released a tense breath slowly.

"I want to talk about what happened with the two of us..." Frostmask's voice was quiet even though she knew Lizardpaw couldn't hear her either way. "Out in the woods, I mean."

Autumnleap was silent, and Frostmask couldn't make herself look at him to see his expression.

"I know I've already apologized about running away from you," she murmured to the ground. "But, I feel like it wasn't enough. I'm not just sorry for running away, but I'm also sorry for how that must've hurt you. And, for avoiding you for the past few days. I should've talked with you about it then. It wasn't right of me. To be such a mouse-heart..."

An edge of anger entered her voice for a moment as she lashed her tail, staring out into the quickly darkening trees as they padded along. But, she stilled herself again before continuing.

"You were being vulnerable with me, and I- I- I couldn't handle it." Frostmask's chin bobbed down to her chest as she dipped her head in shame. "I'm sorry."

Autumnleap still said nothing— just a silent shadow walking at her shoulder. As the moments stretched on, worry mounted in Frostmask's chest that he wouldn't respond at all, but then a sigh whispered from him.

"I'm sorry too," he murmured. "I shouldn't've sprung that on you like that..."

Frostmask was finally able to look at him, and she saw him staring out into the trees and working his jaw as if he wasn't sure what to say.

"I was impatient, but that wasn't fair," he continued finally. "I think

I knew, deep down, that you weren't ready. Or..."

He hadn't really been looking at her, but he still turned his face away from her direction to gaze down at the ground.

"Or, you don't feel the same," he murmured. "But, I still told you. I shouldn't've forced it onto you like that."

A small look of bitter humor twisted onto his face.

"I'm not sure what other reaction I expected, honestly," he said.

Frostmask twitched her tail guiltily at those words as she gazed at him. A beat of silence hung in the air between them.

"I've missed you," she whispered, finally drawing his amber eyes over to hers. "I've been miserable without having you around and knowing that I hurt you... But, you're right."

She swallowed, her mouth dry.

"I don't want a mate right now... but I do want my friend," she murmured.

Frostmask blinked hard and looked away from him.

" ...If you still want to be my friend," she rasped to the snow under her feet.

"Of course!" Autumnleap exclaimed in a shocked voice, bringing her gaze back over to him.

Their eyes met and his gaze seemed to soften like honey left out in a pool of sunshine.

"You'll *always* be my friend," he said.

"You're not mad?" Frostmask meowed hoarsely, her voice quiet but incredulous.

Autumnleap shook his head.

"Maybe a bit disappointed," he admitted. "That things didn't turn

out exactly as I hoped... But, I'm not mad at you."

Frostmask felt a stab of guilt.

"I'm sorry that I'm not ready..." she murmured. "I don't want to hurt you."

He gave his head a sharp shake.

"Don't apologize for that," he said. "You have every right to feel the way you do."

Frostmask's tail twitched.

"It might be easier if we lived in a world where I didn't," she pointed out.

He shrugged, some of his easy nature returning as the tension between them slowly melted away.

"But, in that case, would you still be you?" he said. "Would I even feel the same way then?"

Autumnleap's whiskers twitched in faint amusement.

"I've doomed myself to misery," he said drily.

Frostmask purred softly and bumped her shoulder gently against his. She felt herself relaxing as well. As easy as lying down and falling into sleep on a well-worn nest, their natural patterns of interactions started to slip back into place.

"Don't say that!" she scolded.

Autumnleap purred.

"It's alright," he meowed. "I've accepted that this is my lot in life: unrequited pining."

Frostmask looked away from him as nervousness suddenly swirled around her again.

"You know, it doesn't have anything to do with you, really," she

whispered. "It's me. I just... can't. Not right now at least. I... I—"

Frostmask glanced back over to see him patiently watching her. Frostmask's tail-twitched as her frustration grew at the fact she couldn't figure out a better way of explaining her feelings beyond *'I can't.'*

Autumnleap studied her carefully as if he noticed the growing desperation in her eyes. He bumped her shoulder back with his gently.

"It's okay," he meowed. "I was just teasing."

Autumnleap's expression grew more serious.

"But... if I don't have a chance," he said in a soft voice, barely above a breath. "Honestly, it would be easier for me if you just tell me now. So I can try to move on."

A small bit of his humor reappeared in his eyes.

"Put me out of some of my misery," he added. "But, if I do..."

He glanced away from her, his ears twisting back in a hint of shyness.

"Then I'll wait for you. However long you need," he whispered.

Frostmask felt her heart thumping in her ears. She bent her head to rasp her tongue down her chest fur self-consciously, her heart tightening from nervousness and some other faceless emotion.

"You know how after Swoopstrike died, I told you that I didn't know what I'd do if I lost you too?" Frostmask murmured. "Well, I meant it, you know. And, that's kinda the problem."

Frostmask could feel the heat of his eyes on her even though she didn't look at him.

"I don't know how to..." Her voice trailed off as she struggled to find the words. "If I truly loved you, then losing you would be *devastating,* even more than it already would be now. I can't open

my heart to that kind of pain. I can't do it..."

She blinked her eyes hard.

"I'm sorry," she rasped, her voice wavering. "I feel like there's something broken in me. Grovepelt says that connections are the only things that make life worth living, but the pain feels like it would be too much. You are still my friend. Truly. My *best* friend... But, we can't be anything more, at least not right now. It's not even that I don't want to. It's that I *can't*."

Frostmask felt the fur on her side stir as Autumnleap gently brushed his pelt against hers.

"It's alright, Frostmask," he murmured. "And, I don't think you're broken."

Frostmask glanced over at him, and he gave a soft, gentle purr, his amber eyes warm.

"'Broken' is permanent," he continued. "You're just hurt... but that's okay. Everyone gets hurt sometimes. And, you can heal from that."

Frostmask lowered her eyes, sighing quietly and wishing she had Autumnleap's optimism.

"You don't believe me?" Autumnleap said, reading her thoughts on her face.

She glanced back up at him.

"I want to," she murmured. "But, it seems like a big thing to heal from... It feels permanent. Or, at least, it feels like something that I've carried with me for a very long time."

Autumnleap lightly chuckled, and Frostmask shot him a sharp glance of surprise.

"What's so funny?" she said.

He half-shrugged.

"It's just that..." he meowed. "Weren't you the one who told me that nothing stays? One day we'll all die and even the stars themselves will burn out, or something like that?"

Frostmask's tail twitched.

"I don't think I said it quite that dramatically," she said drily. "But, I recall that conversation. Although I still don't understand your point?"

Autumnleap pointed his muzzle up into the air to indicate the first few stars of Silverpelt that had appeared in the darkening sky, twinkling down at them through the pine branches.

"Well if change is so inevitable that one day even the stars'll be gone, what makes you think that this isn't something that can change?" he asked. "Why does everything only change for the worse, not for the better?"

Frostmask followed his gaze upwards.

"Because death is the conclusion of everything," she said softly as the starlight reflected in her eyes. "So, in the end, that's all that's left, right? That's just how the world works."

Frostmask caught a flicker of movement in the corner of her eye, and she glanced over to see Autumnleap shaking his head.

"I don't think that's right," Autumnleap meowed. "I don't think change is good or bad. It's just *different*."

"Even death?" Frostmask said, raising a brow at him.

Autumnleap shrugged.

"Sure," he agreed. "I mean, there's StarClan waiting for us then. And, for the creatures that don't have our StarClan... who can say that there's not a sky out there that's all their own? Or, maybe they have something else entirely. Maybe they're reborn into something new."

"Maybe..." Frostmask echoed, although her tail still swished skeptically.

Autumnleap flashed her a warm look.

"Besides, in the end, death isn't the conclusion of everything," Autumnleap said. "If it was, how's the world been going on for so long? Why isn't everything dead yet? I think there's just as much life and happiness out here as death and sadness."

Autumnleap nudged her shoulder with his muzzle.

"If you weren't so doom and gloom all the time, you'd be able to see that," he teased.

A small purr rumbled in Frostmask's throat, and she glanced away from him for a moment.

"Funny," she murmured. "Grovepelt told me something similar just earlier."

A loud purr burst from Autumnleap.

"He called you 'doom and gloom' too?" he asked, his amber eyes twinkling. "I wish I'd heard that."

Frostmask swatted a paw at him, trying to cuff him around his ears, but Autumnleap swiftly ducked it and playfully bounded away, out of her reach.

"You know that's not what I meant, frog-brain," Frostmask huffed in mock annoyance, but a warm flame kindled in her chest.

Lizardpaw glanced back at them then, his attention attracted from the small vibrations in the icy ground made by their little scuffle. He cocked his head at them in a curious manner, his gaze asking them what was going on.

Autumnleap purred as he bounded up to walk close to Lizardpaw's side.

'Let's do something fun. Let's have a race,' Autumnleap signed, and Lizardpaw's large ears pricked up in interest.

Frostmask padded up to Autumnleap's other side so she could more

easily make out what he was signing. Autumnleap slackened his pace, slowing the the patrol so he could better use his paws.

'First one to the Burnt Sycamore wins?' Autumnleap suggested, hardly able to keep his tail from flicking with eagerness, even as he used it in his signs.

Lizardpaw's tail began to flick too. He nodded in agreement, before glancing at Frostmask to see what she'd say. Autumnleap followed his gaze over to her as well. A purr began to build in Frostmask's throat, a familiar feeling of contentedness wrapping around her like a warm pelt.

She had missed this. Not just Autumnleap's playfulness or his teasing. But, the gentle ease she felt only with him; a sense that if all else failed, he'd still be there for her. Her world had been upended for the past few days when she feared she'd lost that. But, now everything seemed right again.

"Why would you challenge me to a race that you know you're going to lose?"Frostmask spoke and signed because she knew Autumnleap wasn't as fluent in paw-sign as her.

Lizardpaw began to purr in amusement, and a competitive gleam entered Autumnleap's eyes.

"Don't count me out yet," Autumnleap meowed, doing his best to sign along.

Then Frostmask shot forward without warning. With each step, her paws crunched through the newly frozen thin layer of ice that coated the snowy ground as she tore through the trees in the direction of the Burnt Sycamore.

Frostmask could hear Lizardpaw's paw-steps right behind her, but Autumnleap's voice echoed up from further back.

"Snake-heart!" he shouted, trailing after them. "You didn't even say 'go!'"

Frostmask just purred, enjoying her lead. The victory was short-lived, however, because it was only a matter of moments before

Lizardpaw overtook Frostmask, his longer legs easily eating up the ground in large, loping strides.

Frostmask continued to purr as he passed her, and she slowed her pace. There was no way she'd catch Lizardpaw— he had her beat with both stride-length and energy level— so it was difficult for her to urge herself to push on quicker. And, although she knew she was faster than Autumnleap, it seemed like it'd be more enjoyable to run at his side, simply appreciating the brisk sprint through the forest. Like they'd often done when they were younger.

Autumnleap angled an ear towards her in surprise as she dropped back beside him.

"Don't feel like making me eat dust today?" he meowed between pants.

Frostmask purred.

"I figured I'd give you this win, slow-tail," Frostmask said.

It wasn't long before the lone twisted figure of the Burnt Sycamore appeared between the gaps of the trees in front of them, illuminated by the light of the waxing moon. Frostmask slowed as she noticed Lizardpaw waiting for them at the edge of the clearing surrounding the Sycamore, instead of at the tree's base, where she expected him to be. Lizardpaw was gazing out at the clearing with a furrowed brow, but he glanced over as Autumnleap and Frostmask trotted up to him.

What's wrong? Frostmask asked him.

Lizardpaw just looked back towards the snowy clearing and gestured to it with a nod in answer. Frostmask followed his gaze over. Autumnleap took a few steps into the clearing and immediately cursed as he went sliding, his legs slipping out from under him, and he fell on his side.

"This top part of the snow is pure ice," Autumnleap reported as he carefully lifted himself back to his paws.

Frostmask reached a hesitant paw out to test the surface herself,

and sure enough, she felt a layer of slick ice under her pad. Frostmask pressed down on it, but unlike the whisker-width thin ice that coated the snow in the forest, this patch of ice refused to break under her foot. It didn't even crack or complain a bit under Autumnleap's weight as he now stood, a bit wobbly, on top of it. Frostmask surveyed the Burnt Sycamore clearing with a furrowed brow. It was a shallow indent in the land, lying at a slightly lower level than the forest surrounding it.

"The snow in the forest must have melted earlier, and then the water collected here before it froze over again," Frostmask said, accompanying her words with signs. "But, that means we can't do any training here tonight."

"No kidding," Autumnleap said as he slid slowly across the ice, although it seemed deliberate this time. "You'd break your jaw if you fell on your face."

Lizardpaw glanced at her, waiting to see what Frostmask wanted them to do instead. Her ears twitched.

"Then what *should* we do?" she wondered out loud.

"You tell me, oh wise mentor," Autumnleap purred.

He was several fox-lengths away from her now, still sliding slowly as he drew closer to the center of the clearing. Frostmask tried to shoot him a stern glare, but she couldn't stop her whiskers from twitching with amusement at the sight of him gliding around. The movement seemed very odd since he was simply standing upright—from that appearance, it felt like he should be completely stationary.

"Would you come back here?" Frostmask meowed. "I'm trying to think, but you're distracting me with your sliding around."

"It's kind of fun actually," Autumnleap said with a loud purr, glancing back at her from over his shoulder. "You both should try it."

"But, we're supposed to be doing real training with Lizardpaw!"

Frostmask reminded him.

"This is training!" Autumnleap protested through his purrs. "I'm training myself how to move around on ice! I think I'm getting the hang of it now."

Frostmask rolled her eyes, about to reprimand him again, but when she glanced back towards Autumnleap, she blinked in surprise to see Lizardpaw now on the ice with him.

"Lizardpaw!" Frostmask gasped at the betrayal.

Lizardpaw was purring and slipping and sliding all over the clearing, his lanky legs sometimes splaying out from around him as he slid around, going much faster than Autumnleap was. Lizardpaw glanced back over at Frostmask, his blue eyes shimmering as a clear invitation for her to join them.

"Now you have to come too, Frostmask!" Autumnleap purred, calling from nearly the other side of the clearing now. "If it helps, you can think of it as battle training in case we need to fight on icy ground!"

Frostmask purred and shook her head.

"You're insufferable!" Frostmask shouted at him, although there was no real anger in her voice.

She hesitantly lay a paw on the ice.

"It's part of my charm!" Autumnleap's voice echoed back at her.

After reaching the other side of the clearing, he had changed direction, and he was heading back towards Frostmask now. Frostmask carefully placed all four paws on the ice, her legs wobbling, struggling to keep her upright as she tried to take a step.

"No, no," Autumnleap's voice said, much clearer now as he drew closer to her. "Don't try to walk on it. Just push off of something more solid and let yourself glide around."

Frostmask shot him a look.

"Oh so you're the expert on ice-walking now?" she teased.

Autumnleap appeared thoughtful as he slid closer to her. He was only a few fox-lengths away now.

"I wouldn't call it ice-walking, since, as I said, you don't actually want to walk on the ice," he meowed. "But, yes. I am the expert."

"What *should* we call it then?" Frostmask asked.

She followed Autumnleap's instruction and pushed off the less icy ground behind her with a hind paw, then just let herself glide forward. However, she did still have to wave her tail for balance, or else she would fall off her feet. Autumnleap glided next to her, silently offering his side for her to steady herself against.

"Ice-fighting? It is 'battle training' after all," Autumnleap said with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

Frostmask huffed out air, partly in amusement and partly in exasperation with Autumnleap, but she allowed herself to lean against his side for support anyway. Her gaze flickered over to Lizardpaw, and she tracked him as he went spinning across the clearing, looking almost breathless with laughter. A quiet purr rumbled in Frostmask's throat. She did love that Lizardpaw was having so much fun, and that at least made Autumnleap's ridiculous endeavor here worth it.

"The worst part of all this is that you've turned my own apprentice against me," Frostmask complained, twitching her tail playfully. "Now he's never gonna listen to me if you're around."

Autumnleap purred.

"Oh I don't know about that," he said. "You're his mentor. He'll always be fanatically loyal to you. I'm sure he'll remember this not as the time that Autumnleap had a fantastic idea about the ice, but as the time that Frostmask, his mentor, let him play on the ice."

Frostmask gave a triumphant swish of her tail.

"A-ha! So you admit that it's play!" she said.

"Did I say play?" Autumnleap said, widening his amber eyes in his most innocent expression. "I meant super-serious battle training."

Before Frostmask could retort, Lizardpaw went sliding over to them, just narrowly missing colliding with her side before he stopped himself a few tail-lengths away. Autumnleap and Frostmask came to a stop as well.

'Watch this,' Lizardpaw managed to sign without losing his balance on the ice.

Then he spun in a dizzying circle for a few long moments, nothing but a white-furred blur. When he came out of it, he looked a bit unsteady on his paws, but he was purring quite loudly.

"Very impressive," Autumnleap said with a sage nod. "I think you've mastered the technique of ice-fighting, young apprentice."

Frostmask interpreted Autumnleap for Lizardpaw, leaning against Autumnleap to keep her balance as she did so. When she finished Lizardpaw gave Autumnleap an exaggerated, deep bow of his head, and slid backwards on the ice. Purrs rumbled from both Autumnleap's and Frostmask's throats.

They spent a while like that, chasing each other around the ice, slipping and sliding in circles, sometimes on purpose and sometimes not. Frostmask tried to stick close to Autumnleap the whole time. She couldn't seem to find her balance on the ice as easily as Lizardpaw and Autumnleap did and appreciated Autumnleap's support.

After they had played for a bit, Autumnleap cast a glance upwards to study the moon's position in the sky for a few moments.

"Well this was fun, but we should probably start some real training or we'll be out all night," Autumnleap meowed, causing Frostmask's ears to prick upwards in surprise.

"Autumnleap suggesting training over playing?" Frostmask gasped in mock shock. "I thought you were supposed to be the fun one."

They were now beginning to slide back towards the edge of the

clearing. Autumnleap chuckled lightly.

"You're being too hard on yourself," he said teasingly. "You can be fun *sometimes* too."

Once Frostmask stepped off the slick surface of the ice, she called Lizardpaw back to her with a wave of her tail.

"Let's just hunt then for a bit, then head back to camp," Frostmask meowed and paw-signed as Lizardpaw came gliding over to her. "We'll make up battle training another day."

They set back out into the forest, heading back in the direction of camp. Frostmask had Lizardpaw lead the way again, so he could use his keen nose to sniff out the prey hiding deep in their cozy burrows.

Lizardpaw's ears pricked in attention when he caught a scent, and he led Frostmask and Autumnleap a ways through the trees. Lizardpaw then stopped, flicking his ears to indicate a small mound of snow at the roots of a tree a few fox-lengths ahead of them. Frostmask opened her mouth, feeling the nip of the icy air on her tongue, but there was also a faint hint of the warm scent of mice. Frostmask ears twitched as she picked up the muffled sound of little scampering paws coming from under the snow. It seemed like there was a whole den of mice under there, running around in small caves and tunnels that the rodents had dug out of the snow.

"You hang back and catch any that get past us," Frostmask breathed to Autumnleap before signaling to Lizardpaw, and the two of them glided up to the mound, putting their paws down as light as feathers on the snowy ground.

When they were close to the tree's trunk Lizardpaw glanced up at Frostmask, looking at her for guidance as she circled the little mound of snow by the roots, her ears twitching and rotating as she did her best to pin-point the sound of scuffling. Frostmask stopped at what she felt like was the right spot, and nodded towards the ground. Without even a heartbeat of hesitation, Lizardpaw exploded into motion, slamming his paws onto the snow to shatter its hard, icy shell before shoving his face into the softer powder beneath,

sniffing and snapping for the prey.

Frostmask heard several squeaks of panic from the mice as she also lunged down only a moment after Lizardpaw. Frostmask swiped blindly with her paw and let out a hiss of satisfaction when her claws hit something furry and warm. Lizardpaw reared his head up, a fat mouse wiggling in his jaws, as Frostmask hooked her mouse out of the snow. Lizardpaw went back to digging in the snow once he killed his first mouse, and Frostmask heard the sound of Autumnleap pouncing behind her as he shot after the mice which tried to escape the attack through their exit tunnels.

Lizardpaw's snow covered face lifted with a second mouse in his mouth. This mouse looked as if it had been killed when they collapsed the snowy tunnels on top of it instead of from Lizardpaw's fangs. Frostmask gave the churned up snow a careful sniff to make sure that they hadn't missed any more prey as Autumnleap came trotting over to them with his own mouse in his jaws.

"Four mice isn't bad for the middle of leaf-bare!" Autumnleap said, lifting his tail happily.

He nudged Lizardpaw's shoulder with his muzzle.

'Great find!' he signed as he purred.

Lizardpaw's eyes gleamed.

Autumnleap turned towards Frostmask.

"Did you see me go after those mice that tried to escape?" Autumnleap asked.

"No. Unfortunately I was too busy catching my own," Frostmask said lightly, with a good-natured flick of her tail.

"They were in such a rush, once they came tumbling out of their tunnel, they ran right into each other! It was so funny, their little feet slipping all over the ice..."

Lizardpaw lifted his muzzle to the breeze, a quiet look of concentration on his face as he tasted the air. Frostmask kept a half

an eye on him, idly wondering what new prey scent he caught, while most of her attention remained fixed on Autumnleap's animated story.

Frostmask's brow furrowed, and suddenly, all of her focus snapped to Lizardpaw as the expression of concentration on his face shattered to be replace with wide-eyed panic. The fur on Frostmask's shoulders rose, and Autumnleap abruptly cut off mid-sentence when he also caught sight of Lizardpaw's face.

Lizardpaw whirled towards the two of them, his paws, ears, and tail flying in frantic signs, moving so quickly Frostmask could hardly understand him. But, from his motions one word rang out clearly:

'Blood.'

Blood in the Snow

Frostmask's paws pounded against the snow and she, Autumnleap, and Lizardpaw flew through the trees and back towards their camp. Frostmask breathed in rapid pants, the fur on her back bristling as the metallic tang of blood in the air grew stronger and stronger. The hot, out-of-place scent sliced through the cold night, leaving a clear trail for them to follow.

They were close to their camp now, and yowls echoed through the forest, making Frostmask's stomach lurch. There were voices she recognized— Darkpelt, Dustleap, Pineshade. Frostmask ground her teeth, hunching over and urging her paws to move faster.

She pulled ahead of Autumnleap and Lizardpaw. Her heart hammered hard, both to keep up with her legs and in response to the powerful instinct to fight that now seared in her bloodstream. Although Frostmask was still uncertain about what exactly was wrong, one thing seemed very clear— ShadowClan's camp was under attack.

Frostmask's lips curled up in a snarl as the dark trees parted around them and the thorn barrier came into view.

Righteous fury pulsed through her.

The barrier's tunnel drew closer.

How dare they attack my home.

She ducked under it now, the thorns raking her ears.

She would make them regret taking *a single step* onto ShadowClan's territory.

She burst into the camp to see a writhing mass of cats. The fishy reek of RiverClan hung heavily in the air as Frostmask rapidly took in the battle.

It was a mess.

ShadowClan had been caught thoroughly unprepared, and Frostmask could see many of her clan-mates were missing, likely out on patrols. It looked like a quick defense had been thrown up in front of the elder's den and the medicine cats', and Frostmask felt a quick jab of gratitude that the nursery was empty.

Then Frostmask wasted no more time, and she exploded in a blur of claws and fur onto the nearest unfamiliar pelt.

Frostmask raked her claws down a black tom's side, feeling a jolt of vicious satisfaction at the lines of red blood it left on his pelt. The blow sent him scurrying away, yowling. Behind her, Lizardpaw and Autumnleap screeched to a stop as they exited the tunnel. Both of their pairs of eyes were wide with shock as they took in the sight of their camp under attack by RiverClan.

Frostmask glanced back at Lizardpaw and felt a sudden jolt of fear as she imagined her young apprentice taking on battle-hardened warriors.

She bounded over to Lizardpaw's side, flicking her tail against his flank to get his attention. His eyes snapped towards her, panic clear in them. She signed quickly, flicking her tail from him to herself.

'Stay close to me.'

Some of the panic in his eyes dimmed, and he nodded, getting the message.

"Look out!" Autumnleap snarled as two enemy RiverClan warriors came barreling towards them.

Frostmask whirled around to face them. Moving together, she and Autumnleap split the enemies, he taking one and she the other.

Frostmask leapt onto a grey she-cat's back, hooking her claws deeply into her skin. Lizardpaw darted in, slashing his claws across the enemy's flanks while the she-cat snarled and buckled underneath Frostmask. The she-cat twisted her neck around, sinking her fangs deeply into Frostmask's ankle. Frostmask hissed in pain as

blood flowed from the puncture wounds. She yanked her paw back, out of the she-cat's mouth, and caught sight of bright amber eyes in the grey-furred she-cat's snarling face. Frostmask's brow furrowed in sudden confusion, recognizing that distinctive gaze.

That's not a RiverClan warrior... that's Suneyes of SkyClan!

Frostmask didn't have time to wonder why the SkyClan warrior smelt like a RiverClan cat because Suneyes, noticing Frostmask's distraction, easily seized the opening. Before Frostmask could blink, Suneyes had fallen on her side, rolling to pin Frostmask beneath her.

Snake-dung!

Frostmask hissed like a trapped snake as Suneyes crushed her to the ground with her weight. But, Frostmask managed to keep her claws in the she-cat's pelt, and she pulled out big chunks of fur and sliced through skin even as Suneyes pinned her against the snow.

"Get out of my camp, Suneyes!" Frostmask yowled.

Suddenly Suneyes was yowling in pain. Lizardpaw was clinging to her side, her ear locked in a vicious bite. Lizardpaw released Suneyes, and Frostmask kicked her as hard as she could with her hind-legs, throwing the she-cat off of her. The SkyClan warrior staggered backwards a few tail-lengths, blood dripping on her forehead from the new tear in her ear. If this had been any other battle, at this point Frostmask would've let her opponent slink off while she found someone more formidable to fight.

Frostmask bared her fangs at the she-cat. But, this wasn't any other battle. This was ShadowClan's camp. And, Frostmask would not let Suneyes go until the she-cat was fleeing their territory with her tail between her legs.

Frostmask shot forward, her claws outstretched. Suneyes dodged back with a spat, and Frostmask's claws met only air. Frostmask landed back on all four paws before rearing up to bring her fore-paws slashing down towards the she-cat's head, but again, Suneyes was gone, and Frostmask's paws slammed against empty snow.

Frostmask whirled back towards Suneyes with a frustrated snarl. The SkyClan warrior was quick, Frostmask would give her that much.

Suneyes shrunk backwards more, and Frostmask caught a flash of white fur behind her out of the corner of her eye— Lizardpaw circling for an opening.

Frostmask made sure not to move her gaze off of Suneyes, looking at him would give away his position, but she still flashed Lizardpaw a quick sign, dearly hoping that he was watching her. Suneyes had just enough time to blink at Frostmask in confusion about what she was doing with her paws, before Frostmask lunged forward again, and, as expected, Suneyes again danced back.

But this time, Lizardpaw slipped forward as Suneyes flashed back, and he whacked her hind-legs out from under her with a strong hit of his forepaws. Suneyes gasped as she stumbled, and that was all the hesitation Frostmask needed to leap onto the SkyClan warrior, muscling her to the ground with the help of Lizardpaw.

Frostmask felt a seething haze fill her mind as she swiped her claws through Suneyes pelt again and again while she writhed on the ground under her, wailing.

"Run away you pathetic feather-brain!" Frostmask hissed.

Frostmask finally stepped off of her, letting the she-cat up, but she didn't give Suneyes any room to recover. Instead Frostmask lunged forward, her lips curled back in a furious snarl as she herded Suneyes towards the thorn barrier.

Suneeyes got the hint. Pelt tattered and bleeding, Suneyes turned tail and fled out of the camp.

Frostmask felt the fur on her shoulders rise as, suddenly, a loud shriek slammed into her from behind. It wasn't a voice that she recognized, but somehow she knew it wasn't a SkyClan cat. The scream was unusual— there were no discernible words in the wailing. But, it also somehow felt familiar, and it made Frostmask's heart clenched in fear.

Frostmask whirled towards the voice, and she saw a dark brown tabby had pinned Lizardpaw. Silent Lizardpaw, who Frostmask had never heard make a noise besides some mewls and purrs, let out another loud heart-wrenching shriek as the tom shoved him harder against the ground and sunk his fangs into one of Lizardpaw's forelegs, bending the leg back at an awkward angle. Lizardpaw slashed at the tom's face with his free paw, clawing at his muzzle to try to free himself, but that seemed to just make the tabby more angry. He latched down harder on the leg, eliciting another wail from Lizardpaw.

"Get off of him!" Frostmask yowled, her mind dark with fury as she shot forward.

She barreled straight into the tabby's side, and his jaws opened, freeing Lizardpaw. She managed to knock him away from her apprentice, but the reckless attack left her vulnerable, and now she found herself in the tabby's claws instead. He was bigger than her, and he easily overwhelmed her with his strength, slamming her to the trampled snow. He dipped his head down towards her, a menacing, low growl rumbling in his throat.

Frostmask hissed back defiantly, kicking out with her free hind-legs to rake them down his underside, clawing at his unprotected belly, but she gasped as hot pain shot through her neck when the tom's jaws suddenly snapped shut. Luckily, his fangs hit her shoulder and the loose skin around her scruff instead of her throat, but rather than snapping quickly and releasing, the tom clamped down hard like he had done to Lizardpaw, grinding his teeth deeper into her flesh.

A high-pitched wail of pain escaped Frostmask's throat. She swiped her claws down his sides, and she pushed and writhed, doing everything in her power to get him off of her. But, her struggles were futile and focusing on them grew more and more difficult as pain and panic increased, eclipsing everything else.

She felt her own warm blood flowing through her chest fur.

Then out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of auburn.

"Autumnleap!" she yowled reflexively.

Only a heartbeat later he was there.

The SkyClan warrior's jaws opened in a gasp, and Frostmask's neck was free. Then his weight was suddenly gone from her all at once. Frostmask's eyes widened in shock. Autumnleap and the SkyClan tom were evenly matched in size, but he had somehow managed to wretch the tom off of Frostmask by his scruff.

Frostmask scrambled backwards on the ground, shakily gasping for breath. She pressed a paw to the puncture wounds in her neck, and she breathed a sigh of relief to find that the blood was seeping out, not gushing.

Autumnleap still had the SkyClan warrior by the back of the neck, holding him somewhere between his scruff and the base of his skull. The tabby's head was awkwardly ducked down beneath Autumnleap's jaws, but the tom still bucked, hissing non-stop as he tried to free himself. Autumnleap's golden amber eyes narrowed in cold fury. He yanked his muzzle around, pulling the tabby along with him and rattling the tabby's head until his eyes started to glaze over, and he stopped struggling. Then Autumnleap dug all four paws into the snow and threw his weight to the side, releasing the tabby as he did so. The brown tom flew several tail-lengths until his body made a dull thud against the snow.

He didn't move, and for a heartbeat, Frostmask thought Autumnleap killed him— severed the spinal cord that ran through the tabby's neck. But, then the brown tabby's tail twitched, and he began to slowly pull his unsteady paws back under his body. He wasn't dead, but he was clearly in no state to fight anymore.

"Are you alright?"

Autumnleap's panicked face came into view. The white-hot anger that had been in his eyes just moments before was now replaced with intense worry as he looked down at Frostmask's crumpled form.

Frostmask nodded, although her body was still shaky and the

wounds burned fiercely.

"He missed anything vital," she said. "The bleeding's already slowing."

"Thank StarClan," Autumnleap gasped, bending over to press his face against hers.

Frostmask managed to get her trembling under control enough to raise herself back to her paws.

"Where's Lizardpaw?" she asked urgently, her brow furrowed as scanned the camp. "Is he okay?"

"Snakeeyes has him," Autumnleap said. "See, there."

Frostmask followed Autumnleap's gesture and exhaled gratefully as she spotted Lizardpaw's white pelt close to Snakeeyes' on the other side of the camp. He was limping but didn't seem critically injured, and Snakeeyes was sticking close to him. Lizardpaw would be safe with his mother watching over him, so Frostmask's gaze continued to scan the camp to assess the battle and search for more enemies. She stiffened when she saw Pineshade, Poolcloud, and Cricketpaw defending the elders' den. They were outnumbered by SkyClan four to three.

"It looks like Pineshade and Poolcloud need our help," Frostmask said, her muscles already tensing in preparation to launch herself across camp.

Autumnleap peered at her anxiously.

"Are you sure you can still fight?" he asked. "You could go to the medicine cats' den if you wan—"

Frostmask swiftly shook her head to cut him off. She glanced down at her blood stained chest.

"I'm fine," she said. "It looks worse than it is. I promise."

Autumnleap still looked worried, but he nodded.

"Alright," he said. "I've got your back."

Frostmask's neck wounds stung, but she pushed through the pain as the two of them ran across the clearing, dodging battling cats, until they reached the old pine stump that formed the elders' den. Poolcloud was fighting two cats at once, and Cricketpaw, who had no battle training at all, was very overwhelmed by the warrior who was after her. Cricketpaw seemed to be doing more dodging than fighting at the moment.

"I'll help Poolcloud, you get Cricketpaw," Frostmask panted.

Autumnleap gave a curt nod, then sprung towards Cricketpaw's attacker. Poolcloud was reared up on his back paws as he swatted at the enemy warriors, but even Poolcloud, as large as he was, couldn't hold off two cats forever.

Deciding that she should take a more careful approach to her attack this time, Frostmask darted in to deliver a swift slash down one of the cat's sides before springing back out of reach. The black and orange cat whirled toward her, snarling. Frostmask bared her fangs in response and shot forward with a flurry of swipes towards the cat's face. She landed a couple of blows before the warrior dodged, leaping over Frostmask. Frostmask whirled back towards them, her neck and shoulder wounds throbbing in protest.

Stupid SkyClan cats and their stupid jumping!

She lunged at the cat, her jaws snapping shut a whisker width away from a tortoiseshell ear, causing the cat to jerk back in alarm. Frostmask pressed them harder, locking her gaze on their face while swiping at their feet with her paw. The cat managed to pirouette away from her hit and... right into Poolcloud.

"Need some help?" Poolcloud asked Frostmask as he landed a blow on the cat's side so powerful that it knocked them to the ground.

Frostmask blinked. Poolcloud had such a gentle nature, most of the time she forgot his soft and fluffy pelt hid hardened muscles. She shook off her surprise quickly though, springing onto the tortoiseshell to pin them to the snow, raking her claws down their

shoulders for good measure.

"Leave our camp!" Frostmask yowled down at the cat as she lunged down to sink her fangs into their side so they knew she was serious.

The tortoiseshell hissed in pain, and Frostmask let them up and watched them shoot towards the thorn tunnel.

"The medicine cats' den!" Poolcloud yowled, snapping her attention to the cave.

She watched the tails of three enemy warriors disappear inside of the medicine cats' den. Dawntail, who had been one of the cats defending the den's entrance, now lay injured at the base of Clanrock. Elmclaw had been putting his old warrior training to good use to help her block the cave, but he'd been forced away from the den by two warriors. Still, he struggled hard against them, trying to break free so he could protect his patients.

Pineshade was the closest of their group to Clanrock, and she wasted no time. She barreled straight into the medicine cats' den after the three warriors. Frostmask jolted into motion, her paws following Pineshade. Frostmask's heart pounded, and her wounds pulsed in rhythm with it, but Frostmask pushed the pain away. If Pineshade was trapped in the den by the three enemies, that could be a death sentence for her, and Frostmask wasn't losing another friend to SkyClan.

Frostmask sprinted into the cave, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the almost pitch-black den. She spotted the sick cats, along with Cedarpaw, sheltering in the very back of the cave, Clearstream in front of them. A fearsome snarl marred the normally gentle medicine cat's face as she hissed at the enemy warriors, her back arched and long grey tabby fur bristled out like a pinecone.

The enemy warriors were in the midsection of the cave. One seemed to be keeping an eye on Clearstream and the sick cats while the other two dug through Clearstream's and Elmclaw's herb storage in the nooks in the cave's wall, scattering the carefully piled leaves.

Frostmask didn't waste time trying to figure out what they were

doing with the herbs because Pineshade launched herself at one of the cats.

"Push them out of the cave!" Pineshade hissed at Frostmask as she leapt to Pineshade's aid.

Frostmask nodded curtly. She managed to wedge herself around the enemies to get between them and the back wall, getting only a scratched pelt from one of the SkyClan cats in the process. Frostmask puffed out her fur to make herself look larger. She yowled at her enemies as she sprung forward to slam her paws against the side of a dappled brown she-cat as hard as she could, shoving her a few tail-lengths back towards the entrance while Pineshade muscled a grey-and-white tom forward similarly. The dappled she-cat tried to dart back around Frostmask, seemingly heading back towards the herbs, but Frostmask threw herself in her way, hissing. Frostmask was clawed across her shoulders for the effort, and she screamed as the claws raked through some of the raw puncture wounds, but she managed to block the she-cat from getting deeper in the cave.

Frostmask blinked as another cat entered the den, tensing as she braced herself for more enemies, but she felt a surge of relief as she recognized Dewleaf. Dewleaf easily picked up Pineshade's and Frostmask's strategy, and began her attack, trying to claw the enemy cats back out of the cave from the other side.

Facing an onslaught from in front and behind in such close quarters, the three enemies seemed to cut their losses.

"Stormfang's got the leaves," the grey and white cat hissed. "Let's get out of here."

He turned and led the charge to dodge around Dewleaf and exit the cave, a grey tom with herbs dangling from his jaws following him. The dappled she-cat was last in line, but Pineshade seemed like she wasn't interested in letting the three get away so easily because as soon as the she-cat was back out in camp, Pineshade tackled her from behind, the two of them rolling away in a screeching tumble.

Frostmask shot out of the cave after them, and she watched as the

two toms fled the camp, a few shredded pieces of leaves drifting to the snowy ground behind them.

Frostmask swept her gaze across the camp as she ran. Slowly it was emptying out as enemy warriors were driven away, but battles were still raging in some places, while in others' ShadowClan cats lay injured. Frostmask saw Larkfoot trying to help Darkpelt to his paws, but the massive black warrior was struggling, blood dripping from one of his forelegs, which he held at an awkward angle as if he couldn't manage to get it under him for some reason. Grovepelt was holding his own against an enemy, his muscles still wiry and strong despite his age as he wrestled the SkyClan cat to the ground. Dustleap was crouched by Dawntail's side; she had not yet risen back from the ground. Autumnleap, Poolcloud, and Cricketpaw were still defending the elder's den. Elmclaw had managed to break free of his attackers to get back to blocking the entrance of the medicine cat's den, although another warrior rounded on him to challenge him again. Snakeeyes, Lizardpaw, Fogfur, Dampfang, and Thornheart were still battling as well on the other side of the camp.

Frostmask's attention snapped back to Autumnleap and Poolcloud, she was charging over to them to help when out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dampfang streaking across camp. Pineshade seemed to be holding her own against the brown dappled she-cat she was fighting just fine, but Dampfang leapt at the she-cat regardless, accidentally knocking Pineshade away and to the ground in the process. Pineshade stumbled back to her paws with an irritable hiss as Dampfang started swatting at the she-cat.

As much as it pained Frostmask to admit it, Dampfang's battle skills were impeccable, making him possibly the best fighter in ShadowClan now that Swoopstrike was gone. With fluid grace Dampfang pinned the dappled she-cat to the snowy ground in only a few moves, before curling his lips back in an ugly snarl and hovering his jaws over her neck like a snake about to strike.

"Retreat!" a voice yowled. "Retreat!"

Frostmask jolted and watched as all the enemy warriors quickly abandoned their attacks and began to run from the camp, streaming out through the tunnel.

The dappled warrior under Dampfang's paws buckled and writhed, trying to free herself so she could flee as well, but Dampfang's claws curled deeper into her sides, refusing to let her budge. Dampfang gave a low rumbling growl before striking, snapping his jaws shut and sinking his fangs into her throat. The dappled she-cat's eyes went wild and wide. A gurgling sound oozed from her mouth, and she batted her paws against Dampfang's shoulders, but her blows grew weaker as Dampfang cut off her windpipe.

Frostmask could do nothing but stare at them.

He's going to kill her.

"Dampfang. Dampfang!"

Pineshade was at Dampfang's shoulder, and he jerked, his green eyes flashing up at her as if Pineshade snapped him out of a spell.

"Let her go. They're retreating," Pineshade murmured.

Dampfang gave a low growl and didn't move for a moment. The dappled she-cat stared at Dampfang. Her gaze begged him for her life as her chest twitched, struggling to breathe.

Dampfang opened his jaws.

The she-cat gasped air back into her lungs, scrambling out from under Dampfang and shooting away on shaky legs, leaving a small trail of blood behind her in the snow from the wounds he left in her neck. She ducked through the tunnel as she followed her companions away. No more enemy warriors remained. The camp was suddenly very empty.

Stunned silence fell over ShadowClan when the she-cat's brown tail disappeared into the tunnel. Frostmask gazed around at her injured clan-mates and the trodden down camp. Her ears flattened, her tail sunk down to the ground, and the full pain of her wounds finally swept over her.

What should they do now? Would the enemies come back?

And, where is Sedgestar?

Grovepelt strode forward into center of the camp, limping slightly and still bleeding from slashes across his pelt, but his head was held high with a steady confidence that comforted Frostmask as he took charge.

"Poolcloud, Autumnleap, are you badly injured?" he asked, his eyes settling on the two brothers first.

They both shook their heads.

"Just scratches, Grovepelt," Autumnleap meowed.

"Good. Go keep watch outside of camp," the deputy ordered. "Yowl if anything is out of place."

"Should one of us go fetch Sedgestar?" Poolcloud asked, his eyes wide with anxiety. "What if his patrol is under attack?"

Grovepelt hesitated for a moment.

"No," Grovepelt meowed. "I'm not going to send warriors away from the camp and risk them getting ambushed. We need to stay here and defend our camp in case more enemies come. And, besides... I suspect Sedgestar is fine."

Poolcloud and Autumnleap nodded and hurried to the tunnel, Autumnleap giving Frostmask a blink as he passed her, trying to reassure her. Frostmask turned to Pineshade as they left.

"Where *is* Sedgestar?" Frostmask murmured to her.

Pineshade's ears flattened.

"Soon after you left with Autumnleap and Lizardpaw, Darkpelt's sunset border patrol returned to camp," Pineshade murmured. "They had run into a ThunderClan border patrol who passed information to Darkpelt that a RiverClan patrol led by Perchpelt was waiting at Fourtrees, and Perchpelt had urgent information for Sedgestar. Sedgestar took a patrol and went to Fourtrees to see them."

Frostmask lashed her tail.

"A diversion to get him and some of our warriors out of camp?" Frostmask growled, the pieces falling together.

Pineshade nodded grimly.

"That's what it seems now," she said. "Hopefully Grovepelt's right and he was just lured away, not ambushed too."

"Who's badly injured? Has anyone checked on Clearstream, Elmclaw, and the sick cats?" Grovepelt's voice rang out, pulling Frostmask from her thoughts.

"Dawntail's dead!" Dustleap snarled, lifting his head from his mate's side.

Frostmask jerked in shock, turning to look over at him and Dawntail. The grey and white she-cat still hadn't moved from the base of Clanrock where Frostmask had seen her last. She had been struck down while protecting the medicine cat's den, and her two kits who were inside it.

Cricketpaw let out a heartbreaking wail before sprinting over to her parents. She sunk to the ground next to her father as she nudged Dawntail's face with her muzzle. Dustleap wrapped his tail around his daughter, screwing his eyes shut with grief.

Grovepelt blinked, looking stunned for a moment before he bowed his head.

"I'm so sorry," he meowed. "Is everyone else accounted for?"

Silence met his words, and Frostmask couldn't help but letting out a small breath of relief that at least everyone else was alive.

"When I get my claws on those snake-hearted cats again I'll—" Darkpelt hissed before letting out a gasp of pain and stumbling as he tried to step forward on his injured leg.

Luckily, Larkfoot was at his side, and she supported her mate as he recovered his balance. Dampfang rushed to his parents.

"Father, are you alright?" Dampfang meowed, circling Darkpelt

uneasily.

"I'm fine," Darkpelt snapped, shooing him away with a wave of his tail. "You're worrying about me like a mother hen!"

Dampfang glared at Darkpelt and backed away a few tail-lengths, but his tail still twitched with concern.

"You should go see Elmclaw and Clearstream," Grovepelt's voice cut in as he frowned at Darkpelt.

Darkpelt let out an irritable growl, twitching his tail.

"I'm sure they have much more pressing issues to deal with than me," Darkpelt said, lifting his chin.

"You can't even put any weight on that leg," Grovepelt pointed out flatly, his patience for the proud warrior clearly fading.

Dewleaf padded over to Darkpelt's side.

"Come on," she murmured.

Darkpelt still growled under his breath, but he allowed his mate and his daughter guide him towards the medicine cat's den. He hopped on three legs, his injured foreleg dragging uselessly against the ground, lagging behind him. However, Clearstream emerged from the den before he could enter. The medicine cat looked largely uninjured, her pelt had only a couple scratches, but her blue eyes were round with fear and concern.

"Our herb storage has been destroyed," she meowed to the camp.

Frostmask's eyes widened as icy cold seeped into her gut. Grovepelt jerked, the fur down his back bristling. He blinked hard at Clearstream a few times.

"...What?" Grovepelt rasped as if he was desperately wishing he heard her wrong.

"Elmclaw is salvaging what he can now," Clearstream said, her voice somehow still steady despite the fear and stress that marred her

expression. "But, they stole some herbs and tore the rest to shreds. Leaf-bare will make it very difficult for us to replenish our stock as well."

Gasps of shock reverberated through the camp. Frostmask stomach twisted sickeningly, and she dug her paws into the ground to steady herself.

How would they prevent infection of their wounds or fight off the sickness that plagued the camp without herbs?

We're doomed.

Grovepelt sat back on his haunches heavily, suddenly looking vastly older than his true age.

"We will have to triage. Use the herbs for the worst injuries and sickness first," Grovepelt muttered. "At least, until we can retrieve more herbs."

Clearstream nodded.

"Elmclaw and I will go ask the other medicine cats if they have any they can spare as soon as we can," she meowed briskly. "But, herbs are scarce for everyone this time of year, so I don't think we should get our hopes up. Luckily, I know there are a few herbs that can be found growing even in leaf-bare. We can harvest some bark from the few willows that grow in the marsh, that will help us ease pain if we have no more poppy seeds. Also, I remember that my old mentor told me wintergreen can be used to treat wounds, but I've never had to resort to using it myself. I also know Fallowtuft sometimes uses broom to treat wounds and broken bones, although I've never seen it growing on our territory... Fallowtuft may be fine with me and Elmclaw traveling onto ThunderClan land to gather some though."

Grovepelt nodded.

"We will send out patrols for those herbs as soon as possible," Grovepelt said.

Elmclaw came out of the den behind his mentor. The dark tabby

looked much more worse for wear than Clearstream did. Several long slashes adorned his pelt, deep enough that it was clear they would scar. He also had swelling around one of his eyes, so much so Frostmask could only make out a narrow slit of his green gaze. However, Elmclaw seemed more concerned with the herbs and his patients than his own wounds.

"I've pulled out all of the useable herbs we have left," Elmclaw said to Clearstream. "We have enough to start treating some wounds, but I don't think it'll be enough for everyone."

Clearstream jerked her chin towards Darkpelt.

"Start with him," she said. "I'll assess everyone else and send the worst to you."

Elmclaw nodded. Then he turned to Darkpelt, his brow furrowing as he noticed his leg.

"How'd this happen?" Elmclaw asked.

"I don't know why everyone's making such a fuss—" Darkpelt protested.

"He got bit in the upper leg, there, and it also got twisted," Larkfoot cut in, shooting her mate a sharp look as she nodded at his wound. "I saw it happen. After that, it just went out from under him all of a sudden."

"Thanks Mom," Elmclaw murmured to Larkfoot as he continued to frown at Darkpelt. "Take him inside."

Frostmask's attention turned to Clearstream as the medicine cat padded up to her, her expression concerned.

"What happened here?" Clearstream asked Frostmask in her gentle way as she nodded at her bloodstained chest.

Frostmask glanced down at the red clumping in her fur, and her neck wound suddenly started aching more fiercely as she was reminded of its presence.

"I got bit on my neck and the edge of my shoulder," Frostmask murmured, angling her head to the side to give Clearstream better access to it.

The medicine cat spent a long few moments looking at the puncture wounds closely.

"Thankfully it missed your jugular and your windpipe," Clearstream meowed finally. "But, it's still deep, and judging by the state of your pelt, you've lost not an insignificant amount of blood. Do you feel any weakness in your limbs? Darkness around the edges of your vision? A headache?"

"I do have a headache," Frostmask admitted.

It'd had been mild enough for her to easily ignore during the battle, but now she could feel it throbbing behind her eyes with each beat of her heart. Clearstream nodded, her gaze concerned.

"Go to Elmclaw, he can treat you after Darkpelt. Then you should drink water and get something to eat and rest until Elmclaw or I tell you otherwise. I'd keep you in my den, but with white-cough in the camp, and the current state of our herb stock... it's best for everyone to minimize contact with any sick cat. Still, I want someone to keep an eye on you in case you pass out or your condition worsens from blood loss. I'll ask one of your den-mates if they can do it," Clearstream said.

Frostmask nodded before wincing when the wounds burned in protest.

"Alright, Clearstream," Frostmask murmured.

As Clearstream moved on to the next warrior, Frostmask slowly padded over to Clanrock, pausing for a moment to glance over at Cricketpaw and Dustleap as they crouched over Dawntail. She wondered for a moment if anyone had told Buzzardpaw and Cedarpaw, who were still in the medicine cat's den, about their mother before she turned aside and walked into the cave.

The den was still a mess, with moss from the nests and shredded

bits of herbs strewn all over the cave floor. Buzzardpaw, Flymask, and Treefur, all sick with white-cough, still crouched in the back of the cave. Cedarpaw, who was in the den recovering from the rat bites he received earlier in the day, sat closer to the front of the cave, near Elmclaw and Darkpelt. Elmclaw seemed to still be assessing Darkpelt's wounded leg, but Larkfoot and Dewleaf were no longer in the den.

"Can you stretch your paw out to touch mine, Darkpelt?" Elmclaw asked.

Darkpelt was sitting awkwardly, slouched to the side in such a way that it was obvious he wasn't holding any of his weight on his injured foot. He grunted in response to Elmclaw's question, slightly rotating his shoulder forward, but his paw only twitched slightly close to Elmclaw, and the lower part of his leg refused to move at all.

"I can't. It hurts too much," Darkpelt growled. "And the elbow's all swollen up. It's too stiff to move."

Elmclaw just murmured noncommittally in response to Darkpelt's self diagnosis, running his paws up and down Darkpelt's injured leg.

"Are you sure isn't not broken?" Darkpelt growled.

"As I told you before, I don't feel any bones out of place," Elmclaw said, his brow furrowed. "But, I can tell this is a severe injury. It's not clean either. I think the muscles and ligaments in your elbow got all torn up. That's why you can't move your leg. And, injuries of such severity... can have lasting consequences."

Darkpelt bristled.

"Are you saying I'm going to be like this forever now?" he snapped, baring his teeth. "Unable to use this leg?!"

Elmclaw stopped examining his wound, and he turned towards the small amount of herbs piled at his side.

"We will have to see how well you heal to know for sure," Elmclaw said, his voice calm. "I'm going to put some herbs on your cuts now,

and maybe I can find you something for the swelling."

Elmclaw began chewing some herbs into a poultice as he shifted through the pile of scavenged herbs.

"How am I supposed to hunt or fight if this leg just drags uselessly around under me?" Darkpelt spat. "Are you sure you know what you're doing? Maybe I should have Clearstream take a look at me."

This comment finally seemed to get under Elmclaw's skin because he stiffened, his brown and black striped fur bristling slightly down his back.

"As you know, Father." Elmclaw's tone was calm but underlaid with a layer of ice. "I've been a full medicine cat for seasons now. Clearstream and I can both assure you that I know what I'm doing."

Darkpelt just grunted again in response. Elmclaw smeared the herbs he had been chewing on the cuts on Darkpelt's leg before pawing a herb out of the pile and in Darkpelt's direction.

"Eat this," Elmclaw meowed curtly at him before turning to look at Frostmask.

Frostmask jolted almost guiltily, her ears angling back. She couldn't help but feeling like she'd been eavesdropping on a private family argument. But, Elmclaw seemed his normal genial self as he walked up to her.

"Hey Frostmask, what have you got for me?" he said.

Frostmask showed him her wounds on her neck. He licked them clean for her since she was unable to reach them herself before smearing a poultice to prevent infection on the wounds like he did with Darkpelt. Frostmask flinched as the herb stung at her wounds.

Elmclaw scanned his gaze over the other scratches that adorned her pelt.

"I would put some herbs on those too, if it was any other time," Elmclaw said. "But, they are shallow and considering the state of our supply..."

Frostmask nodded.

"I understand," she meowed.

"Make sure you groom them and keep them clean, or infection is more likely," Elmclaw warned.

He then echoed Clearstream's advice to take it easy before telling her she could leave the den. Frostmask hesitated before she rose to her paws.

"Did you tell Cedarpaw and Buzzardpaw about Dawntail?" she murmured in a low voice that only reached his ears.

Elmclaw sighed, his board shoulders sagging.

"I'd forgotten. I've just been thinking about everyone's injuries and the herbs..." he said, looking weary. "I'll tell them now. The poor little scraps. They're going through enough right now with their injuries and sickness; it's tragic that they have to deal with too."

Frostmask nodded, her whiskers drooping. Elmclaw started to turn, but Frostmask brushed her tail down her side to stop him for a moment.

"I'm no medicine cat," Frostmask murmured. "But, your cuts look pretty deep to me too. Maybe you should think about using a little of some herbs for yourself instead of giving them all away to our clan-mates... What we do if you fell sick to an infection?"

Elmclaw rumbled a brief purr.

"Alright... Thanks for the concern Frostmask," he said, his whiskers twitching in dark humor. "I'll see what Clearstream's opinion on my wounds are since I can't seem to be objective about them myself."

Frostmask just nodded. Elmclaw headed to the back of the den to Buzzardpaw and Cedarpaw, while Frostmask turned around and padded out of the den, unable to stay and hear Elmclaw tell the young apprentices that their mother was dead.

When she emerged from the den, she headed towards the fresh-kill

pile to eat something as Clearstream had suggested. The pile was luckily largely untouched, although a few pieces of prey had been thrown about in the chaos of the battle. Frostmask picked up a slightly mangled and completely frozen shrew and settled down with it, holding it in her paws and rasping her tongue across it to thaw it enough that she could take a bite.

Frostmask's gaze flickered across the camp as she waited for the prey to warm. She saw Cedarpaw emerge from the medicine cat's den, his eyes welling with grief. He rushed over to his family, who were still crouched at the base of Clanrock. Buzzardpaw staggered out of the cave a few moments later, although he kept his distance from the rest of them, likely not wanting to infect his littermates or his father with his white-cough. Buzzardpaw gazed over at them mournfully, his head bowed.

Lizardpaw made his way over to the group hesitantly, gently touching his tail to Cedarpaw's flank, prompting the dark tabby to lift his head from Dawntail's side so Lizardpaw could sign something to him. Cedarpaw nodded and Lizardpaw crouched down between Cedarpaw and Cricketpaw, pressing his white pelt to his den-mates' supportively.

Frostmask watched Lizardpaw for a moment longer. She wanted to check with him to see how he was, but also she didn't want to interrupt him when he was comforting his den-mates. She glanced away, deciding that she would speak to him later.

Fogfur and Thornheart were tidying up the camp. Some parts of the thorn barrier and branches of dens had broken off during the fight, so the two toms silently cleared the area, sticking brambles back into any new gaps in the thorn barrier, and kicking fresh snow over any red-stained patches they came across.

"Hey."

Frostmask's ears pricked as Pineshade appeared at her side.

"Clearstream told me to keep an eye on you," Pineshade said, taking a seat next to Frostmask. "I think I'm supposed to make sure you don't die or something."

Frostmask gave a snort of bitter humor.

"Thanks," she muttered.

"That bite you got on your neck does look pretty nasty," Pineshade said, making herself more comfortable as she settled in the snow and curled herself close to Frostmask so they could share the heat of their pelts. "Do you think it'll scar?"

Frostmask's ear twitched. She knew Pineshade was talking about meaningless nonsense, but she also knew it was Pineshade's way of trying to distract Frostmask, or herself, from the overwhelming nature of the attack.

"Maybe," Frostmask meowed, indulging the desire not to think about grave situation their Clan was in, if only for a few moments. "I hope not though. I don't want it to mess up the look of my pelt."

"What are you talking about?" Pineshade said, screwing her face up in an affronted expression. "Scars are cool! They showed you faced something tough and won!"

Frostmask purred lightly.

"What if you get a scar doing something stupid though?" she asked, rolling the shrew between her paws; it was almost an edible temperature now. "Like, I don't know... jumping out of a tree to prove a point?"

Pineshade shrugged.

"That's when you make up a cool story for it instead," she said, her tail-tip flicking. "'I wrestled a badger to save a kit' or something."

Frostmask purred and bent her head to take a bite of the prey. After the first bite, she devoured the rest quickly, suddenly ravenous. Her headache seemed to fade back a bit as her stomach filled. She licked the last bit of blood off her lips and leaned closer to Pineshade to fight off the cold breeze that swirled through the camp.

"Sedgestar!" Poolcloud's voice rang out from outside of the camp, causing Frostmask's ears to prick up suddenly.

She sat up straighter and exchanged a quick look with Pineshade.

The thorn barrier rustled and Sedgestar came pushing through, his sizable patrol of cats just behind him. Sedgestar jerked to a stop quickly, just a few fox-lengths into the clearing.

Nothing could've prepared Frostmask for the look on Sedgestar's face when he saw the ravaged camp. The pure shock and fury of it lifted the fur on her shoulders.

"What. Happened." Her leader's voice was halting and raspy, something between a croak and a snarl.

"RiverClan," Thornheart spat as he swiped his claws across the snow in front of him.

"RiverClan?!" Sedgestar echoed with a growl, his tail whipping.

Frostmask opened her jaws, about to correct him, but Grovepelt limped forward before she could.

"No, not RiverClan," Grovepelt meowed as he staggered over to Sedgestar. "Those were SkyClan warriors."

Sedgestar turned to him, his brow furrowing, although he looked no less furious.

"I'm sure of it," Grovepelt continued. "But, they disguised themselves with RiverClan scent."

Sedgestar buried his claws into the snowy ground.

"How is that possible?!" Sedgestar hissed through clenched fangs. "My patrol was right at the border this whole time! How did they get past us?"

"That's not the worst part," Grovepelt sighed. "They destroyed our herb storage and stole some others. Dawntail is dead, and injuries range from severe to moderate."

Sedgestar was silent for a moment as this information sunk in, and his patrol dispersed behind him to their loved ones. Rowanheart

and Yewpaw rushed to Snakeeyes and Lizardpaw. Hollowpaw sprinted over to where her family huddled around Dawntail. Hootflight and Beeclaw went over to check on Thornheart, then Beeclaw split away from his brothers to run to the medicine cat's den to see if Elmclaw was okay, his green eyes round with worry. Dappledpelt and Leafbreeze stayed in place, but pressed their pelts closer together in silent gratitude that both of them had avoided injury in this battle. Marshnose padded slowly over to Dawntail, his head bowed and his tail dragging in the slush, and Frostmask was reminded that the two were littermates.

Emberflower pressed herself against Sedgestar's side, clearly trying to calm or comfort her mate. Every hair on Sedgestar's pelt bristled, vibrating with wrath, his amber eyes ice-cold.

"What happened at Fourtrees?" Grovepelt prompted gently, trying to pull Sedgestar out of his furious haze.

"Nothing," Sedgestar spat. "There were no cats there when we arrived. We waited for a while then turned back. I would bet my pelt that the *'RiverClan'* patrol we were supposed to meet there, were the cats attacking this camp. I can't believe Willowstar sunk to making this pact with Fennelstar. Both RiverClan and SkyClan will pay for this."

Sedgestar began to pace, his tail lashing as he raked unsheathed claws through the churned up snow.

"We actually don't know if RiverClan was involved," Grovepelt meowed in a steady voice. "The SkyClan warriors could've rolled in their scent-markers just to throw us off."

"I wonder if there was ever a patrol at Fourtrees at all," Sedgestar barreled on as if his deputy had not spoken. "Maybe ThunderClan has turned on us too. How can we trust their word when none of our cats saw anyone there?"

"I don't think that sounds like Morningstar," Grovepelt murmured, but Frostmask saw a flash of doubt in his eyes.

Sedgestar turned towards Emberflower suddenly.

"Emberflower, I want you to lead a patrol. Follow their scent trail and make sure that the SkyClan cats are gone from our territory. If you find them still here, you are not to engage. Instead come back immediately."

"Of course," she said with a nod.

"Take Rowanheart, Dappledpelt and Leafbreeze with you." Sedgestar's eyes flashed towards Thornheart. "Thornheart, are you fit enough to join them?"

Thornheart took a step forward raising his chin.

"Yes, Sedgestar," he meowed.

"Good, then you go too," Sedgestar said.

Sedgestar turned to nod at Hootflight.

"Hootflight, go relieve Autumnleap and Poolcloud from their watch. We will not be leaving the camp unguarded for even a moment."

Hootflight dipped his head.

"Yes, Sedgestar," he meowed.

"Where's Redclaw and Weaseltail?" Frostmask murmured to Pineshade as her clan-mates scrambled to obey Sedgestar's orders.

"They had gone out earlier on a hunting patrol with Featherpaw, Mosspounce, Murmurstep, Amberberry and Kestrelmoon," Pineshade muttered back. "Probably totally oblivious to everything."

"Hunting. Snake-dung," Frostmask whispered, suddenly remembering the four mice she, Autumnleap, and Lizardpaw had left in the woods before their mad dash to the camp. "I left some mice out in the forest by that big pine. It would be such a waste if they became crow-food."

Pineshade nodded.

"Hold on, I'll tell the patrol so they can grab them," she said.

Pineshade hurried over to stop Rowanheart before he left camp, murmuring something to him. Rowanheart nodded before turning and padding out the thorn tunnel. Pineshade came trotting back over to Frostmask.

"They'll take care of it," she said with a nod.

"Thanks," Frostmask murmured, slowly getting to her paws. "I should go talk to Lizardpaw and see how he's doing."

Pineshade waved her tail dismissively.

"Okay, let me know if you need anything," she said. "Try not to keel over without me around, alright?"

"I'll do my best," Frostmask said drily, slowly padding over to Lizardpaw.

As she walked across the camp, she overheard Grovepelt still deep in conversation with Sedgestar. He murmured something about the herbs Clearstream talked about, and Sedgestar nodded his head.

"... send a patrol to search for them as soon as we're able," Sedgestar rumbled.

Dawntail's body had been moved into the center of the clearing to prepare for her vigil. Her family still crouched beside her, grooming her fur to smooth it down. Lizardpaw had moved away from Cedarpaw and Cricketpaw, and now he sat with his mother and brother in front of the apprentices' den. Snakeeyes was grooming Lizardpaw's ears while Yewpaw curled up on the other side of his mother. Frostmask was relieved to see that the bite on Lizardpaw's leg had received some care from Elmclaw.

It won't get infected then, hopefully.

Lizardpaw jumped to his feet when he saw Frostmask, although he kept his injured leg off the ground. Lizardpaw ran and hopped over to her, rubbing his cheek against hers and purring with obvious relief that Frostmask was doing okay. Frostmask purred in response before pulling her head back. Behind him, Snakeeyes gazed at Frostmask with her mismatched eyes. Frostmask saw she had some

deep slashes on her shoulders, but she hadn't received treatment for them yet.

I wonder if Elmclaw and Clearstream have already run out of herbs.

"Thank you for watching out for Lizardpaw during the battle," Snakeeyes said, before a slight growl entered her voice. "I saw you tackle that horrible cat off of him."

"Of course!" Frostmask said. "I'm the one that should be thanking you for keeping an eye on him when we got separated."

"You know I'd never let anything happen to them," Snakeeyes murmured, turning her head to rasp her tongue across Yewpaw's silver and black striped forehead for emphasis.

'How are you?' Lizardpaw asked, nodding towards the bite on her neck.

'I need to rest, but I'm fine,' Frostmask responded.

Lizardpaw sat down heavily, looking exhausted himself. Frostmask felt a twinge of sympathy for him. It had been a very long day, and he was still such a young cat. It felt like seasons ago that they had gone on the patrol down the WindClan border, and winded up in the Carrionplace, but in reality, it had only been in the morning.

'I'm sorry I couldn't help you,' Lizardpaw signed. '*It looked bad, and I tried to get to you. But then someone was in my way...'*

Frostmask bumped her forehead against his gently, trying to push away the wide-eyed guilty expression on his face.

'It's alright,' she signed. '*Really.'*

Lizardpaw nodded before curling back up on the ground next to Snakeeyes. Frostmask turned as she heard paw-steps approaching her. It was Autumnleap padding over. Frostmask nodded goodbye to Lizardpaw, Snakeeyes and Yewpaw before turning and meeting him a few fox-lengths away. He greeted her with a soft purr.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, glancing at her cut. "I'm glad you

got some herbs."

"Okay, I guess," Frostmask said, sighing softly. "How about you?"

She scanned her gaze across his pelt, but couldn't see any bad wounds.

"I'm fine," he meowed, brushing away her concern with a wave of his tail.

"You better clean your cuts well though," Frostmask said. "Because I doubt they'll have any herbs left to treat them."

Autumnleap's expression darkened.

"The state of it's that bad then?" he meowed.

Frostmask sighed again.

"You should see the inside of the medicine cats' den," she said. "It looks like a monster ran through there. The leaves are shredded into useless bits."

Frostmask sat down, running a paw across her face. Her headache was back. Autumnleap blinked sympathetically at her and leaned over to nudge her cheek with his muzzle.

"You look exhausted. Do you want to get some rest?" he asked. "You won't be missing anything. I don't think Sedgestar wants anyone moving a whisker until Emberflower returns with news, or Redclaw's and Weaseltail's patrol comes back so the camp has more reinforcements."

Frostmask yawned at the thought of her nest.

"That's not a bad idea," she murmured. "Although I feel a bit bad going to sleep when Dawntail's vigil is just starting."

Autumnleap followed her gaze towards the grey-and-white furred body in the center of the camp.

"I think she'd understand," he murmured.

"Also Clearstream put Pineshade in charge of watching me in case my condition worsens," Frostmask said. "Or, 'making sure I don't die' as Pineshade put it."

Autumnleap's whiskers twitched in a faint hint of amusement.

"I don't think she'd mind me relieving her," Autumnleap said, before inclining his head in the direction of the warriors' den. "Come on."

Having no energy left in her to argue, Frostmask followed him.

Secrets and Lies

It was still dark out when Frostmask awoke slowly. She groaned as she lifted her head. Her bruises and joints ached, while the bite on her neck twinged in pain. But, her headache was gone, and she did feel a bit stronger after the snippet of sleep, even if she wasn't able to recover for a full night.

Autumnleap had woken her up by murmuring her name, and he blinked over at her now, his reflective eyes glinting slightly in the low light of the den.

"What's going on?" Frostmask muttered blearily, pawing at her eyes as she tried to chase sleep away.

"Sedgestar called a clan meeting," Autumnleap said. "Emberflower just got back. And Redclaw's patrol came back while you were sleeping."

Frostmask nodded, stumbling to her paws.

"Dawntail's death ceremony also happened while you were asleep," Autumnleap said, his tail twitching with a hint of guilt. "I didn't know if you wanted me to wake up for it. But, I'm sorry I didn't if you did."

"It's alright," Frostmask murmured as they padded out of the den.

The normally composed Sedgestar was fidgeting on Clanrock. His fur stuck up in unruly clumps, and his tail lashed while his ears twitched at every small sound. It was obvious that he had not gotten any rest yet.

He's probably working on our plan for revenge.

Frostmask let out a quiet, appreciative growl, feeling a flash of pride and gratitude that ShadowClan had such a dedicated leader. The ShadowClan cats all quickly took a seat in the camp's clearing,

and all eyes turned to Sedgestar to await the news.

"Emberflower, tell them what happened," Sedgestar said, his voice grim.

Emberflower rose to her paws and stood at the base of Clanrock next to Grovepelt, her ginger pelt still bright, even in the low light.

"It appears that the SkyClan patrol has left our territory," she said. "The RiverClan stench they used left a clear trail for us."

"Well that's good, right?" Hootflight's voice called out, but Emberflower just shook her head.

"They left our territory through *our tunnel*," Emberflower said with a low growl. "Their trail led there clearly. We continued into the tunnel and followed their scent until we reached ThunderClan land. There's no mistaking it."

"I'm sure that's how they managed to get past my patrol and into our territory," Sedgestar snarled.

Yowls of fury and outrage echoed through the ShadowClan camp. Frostmask felt her fur bristle, and she sunk her claws into the snowy ground.

How did SkyClan know about our tunnel?!

"How is this possible?!" Greytail snarled from outside the elders' den, her pelt prickling with fury. "The tunnel has been closely guarded information by ShadowClan since the thunderpath's creation! Not even ThunderClan or WindClan seem to know about it, and it's on their own territory! And, yet SkyClan found out?!"

"No way SkyClan's smart enough to figure it out on their own!" Marshnose spat.

Other yowls of agreement met Greytail's words. Even Sedgestar nodded at her, his eyes narrowed to furious slits. Grovepelt rose to his paws, gesturing with his tail for his clan-mates to settle down.

"We have been hunting on SkyClan land intermittently for the past

two moons," Grovepelt said, having to raise his voice to be heard over all the growling and snarling. "It is possible that one of our hunting parties was tracked by SkyClan, unknowingly."

Several overlapping voices spoke at once.

"Snake-dung!" Someone spat.

"But, we've been so careful! No one's been caught!" Someone else yowled.

Dampfang leapt to his paws, his green eyes bright with anger.

"I know what it is!" Dampfang yowled his voice over the rest. "StarClan warned us about this, don't you remember? The rotten pine omen!"

Dampfang narrowed his eyes, and for a brief moment, his gaze met Frostmask's.

"There's a traitor in our midst," Dampfang snarled.

Frostmask's stomach flipped, and she dug her claws into the ground. She snarled in anger at the accusation, but she wasn't sure if anyone else noticed Dampfang's look at her. The clan was in chaos now— many cats were on their feet, pelts bristling, and hisses of shock and fury echoed all around Frostmask.

"Enough. Enough!" Sedgestar yowled, but even he looked unsettled by the mention of the omen— his fur stood on end and his tail twitched. "We can't let this attack divide us like this!"

"Well what *do* we do Sedgestar?" Darkpelt said, as he limped forward, still not using his injured leg.

Sedgestar scraped his unsheathed claws against the stone beneath him.

"Rest assured, SkyClan will pay for what they've done," Sedgestar snarled. "But, we are in no state to launch a counter-attack at this moment. Several cats are ill or injured, and we don't have the herbs necessary to treat them. It's true that SkyClan landed a hard blow

against us today. But, we will overcome this and strike back harder. We will make every cat in SkyClan regret being kitted because we are *ShadowClan* and when we work together, nothing can stop us!"

Sedgestar paused for a moment to lash his tail and let his Clan growl in agreement.

"For now, I'm suspending the hunting trips to SkyClan territory," Sedgestar said. "We will need all our cats on our land. We will increase patrols down the ThunderClan border and check the tunnel regularly for any activity. And, as soon as sunrise, I want cats helping Elmclaw and Clearstream with finding herbs. If one of them asks you to escort them to speak to another Clan's medicine cat about borrowing herbs or to aid them with gathering herbs, I want you to drop everything and do that. Understood?"

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the Clan.

"Once we're back to our full strength, SkyClan *will* pay," Sedgestar snarled before bounding down Clanrock, indicating that the meeting was over.

Cats began to disperse. Dustleap, Marshnose, and some others went back to holding vigil over Dawntail's body, but many cats headed to their dens to get some more sleep before morning. Frostmask turned, about to do the same.

"Frostmask."

She jerked at the sound of Sedgestar's voice.

She turned her head to see him regarding her with a sharp amber gaze while their clan-mates filed around them.

"Come with me. I wish to speak with you in my den for a moment," Sedgestar said curtly before turning and striding over to the base of the Oak Tree, vanishing into the tunnel between the roots.

Frostmask stared after him, mystified.

"What's that about?" Autumnleap murmured from her side.

"I have no clue," Frostmask responded, rising to her paws.

She followed Sedgestar into his den, her breaths echoing in the narrow tunnel for a moment before it opened up into a larger earthen cave. As her eyes adjusted to the low light, Frostmask blinked in surprise to see that Sedgestar was pacing the length of the cave instead of sitting in his nest with his tail neatly wrapped around her paws, like she expected him to be.

Frostmask stood near the tunnel, feeling more awkward by the moment as the heartbeats stretched on. Sedgestar just continued to pace silently, his jaw clenched in frustration, barely acknowledging Frostmask besides occasionally shooting her sharp side-glances.

Frostmask self-consciously cleared her throat, her tail-tip twitching with unease. She'd never seen her leader in such a state of agitation before.

"Is— is something wrong, Sedgestar?" Frostmask managed to ask.

Sedgestar seemed to tense at the sound of her voice, but he forced himself to stop pacing. Now he stood as stiff as a log, staring at Frostmask. His tail twitching behind him was the only part of him still in motion.

"Was it you?" he said suddenly.

Frostmask blinked, taken aback. Her confusion and worry deepen in her chest. Sedgestar kept staring at her. He looked furious. Was he furious at *her?*

"I- I don't understand," Frostmask stammered, her ears flattening.

"Did you tell them?" Sedgestar said, a low, dangerous growl rumbling beneath his words. "Did you tell SkyClan about the tunnel?"

Frostmask blinked, her heart suddenly plummeting to her stomach as the ground seemed to shift under her.

It's not just Dampfang... Sedgestar... he doubts me too. My own leader!

Frostmask's tail curled under her belly and her chin fell down to her chest as if her whole body caved in on itself.

"How can you say that?" Frostmask rasped, her voice quavering.

Frostmask quickly swiped a paw across her face, hating how much her voice shook. Her wavering voice didn't last long though. The shock and sadness inside her was quickly being replaced by pain and anger. She lifted her gaze to shoot Sedgestar a burning look.

"ShadowClan is my home!" she spat. "I would never do anything to harm the cats here! Why would you say that?! I've always been loyal to ShadowClan! To *you!"*

Frostmask surprised herself with the intensity in her voice. She had never spoken to Sedgestar with such incivility before.

He just studied her in silence, but his twitching tail behind him began to still. Frostmask could see hidden thoughts flickering in his gaze as he looked at her, trying to read her. To see if she was telling the truth.

Frostmask clenched her jaw in anger, digging her paws into the floor of the den.

"Why. Why do you think I betrayed ShadowClan?" Frostmask repeated, her mew coarse.

Sedgestar sighed, and the tension drained out of his body. His face was suddenly lined with weariness and regret. He sat down in his nest, slowly shaking his head to himself.

"I should not have said that. I'm sorry," Sedgestar murmured, closing his eyes for a moment. "This situation has me on edge. At no other point during my leadership has ShadowClan been so soundly defeated on our own territory. I'm not thinking straight. Please. Forgive me, Frostmask."

A low growl grew in the back of Frostmask's throat; her anger not stifled.

That wasn't good enough. She had been loyal to ShadowClan, to

Sedgestar, every heartbeat of her whole life! And, yet Sedgestar would question her so blatantly? How could she blindly forgive a leader that didn't trust her?!

"Tell me," Frostmask demanded, her tail lashing.

Sedgestar hesitated, studying Frostmask with his amber gaze. The silence stretched on between them, but then he finally dipped his head in concession.

"I'm sorry you are finding out about this," Sedgestar meowed, his voice low but steady. "And, especially finding out in this manner... I never intended you to know... But, when your mother brought you to ShadowClan, she told me that your father was a SkyClan warrior."

Frostmask inhaled sharply and took a step back from him, her eyes widening. Her heart began to hammer, but curiously, she didn't feel surprise at the revelation, only icy dread trickling down her spine. Frostmask attempted to swallow, but she found her mouth to be bone-dry. She pressed her paws hard against the earth beneath her to try to steady herself.

The sound of her pulse pounded in her ears, so loud that it almost blocked out the sound of Sedgestar's low voice as he continued.

"The rotten pine omen made me suspicious. I thought you found out the truth. Or your father contacted you, somehow," Sedgestar muttered. "Maybe you told him about the tunnel on accident, not understanding what he'd do with such information..."

"Who else knows?" Frostmask cut in, her voice a rough whisper.

Sedgestar's gaze was troubled as he looked at her, but he answered her question.

"The patrol that found you: Emberflower, Beeclaw, Swoopstrike... as well as Grovepelt and Redclaw," Sedgestar said.

Frostmask flinched and took another step back from him as if he slashed her across her chest.

"This whole time..." Her voice was a whisper, but it vibrated with pain and betrayal. "You all knew... Swoopstrike, Grovepelt, Redclaw... and none of you ever told me?"

Sedgestar gave his head a small shake.

"Don't blame them," he meowed. "I was the one that asked them to tell no other cats. Not even you."

Frostmask dug her claws into the ground, her ears flat against her head.

"It was not your secret to hide!" The words exploded from her mouth. "You kept half of *my* identity from me. You *lied* to me! All of you! And, then you have the audacity to accuse me of betraying ShadowClan, when you're the liars?! What happened to 'ShadowClan keeps no secrets among clan-mates!?'"

Sedgestar looked at her steadily, but a change rippled across his features. He straightened his posture, his face became smooth and expressionless, while his eyes turned into blank amber gems, revealing none of his thoughts. Frostmask blinked as she realized she was no longer speaking to Sedgestar, but instead to 'The Leader of ShadowClan.'

"I did what I thought was right," he said in a low, hard voice, his eyes boring into Frostmask's. "I did not want your loyalties divided. I wanted you to be totally devoted to ShadowClan, the home that raised you. Not some stranger. A *useless* SkyClan tom."

Frostmask stared at him, her heart pounding like thunder through her.

This must be what it felt like when cats from the other Clans looked at Sedgestar. This was not the cat who spent sunhigh lounging around, purring with Grovepelt and Emberflower. He did not dote on Lizardpaw, Featherpaw, and Yewpaw. He didn't watch Rowanheart walk past with eyes that shown with pride.

This cat was ice cold and practical. His gaze was sharp, shrewd, and calculating, and it never rested, always working to figure out his

next move.

"If I had a chance to do it over, I wouldn't change a thing about my decision. Didn't Redclaw and the other queens raise you well?" Sedgestar continued, his tone insisting. "Wasn't Swoopstrike a good mentor? Aren't you happy to be in ShadowClan?"

Frostmask pressed her ears harder against her head, trying to block out the sound of his voice. She glanced away from him, down to the ground, unable to look at the cold, unfeeling face of a cat who she didn't know.

"What was his name?" Frostmask rasped.

She curled her claws deeper into the earth, feeling like she already knew the answer, but she refused to let the word into her thoughts.

Don't say it. Don't say it.

She saw white fur in her mind and a flash of cold green eyes. Frostmask screwed her eyes shut for a moment and wiped the image away, clenching her fangs until her jaw ached against it.

Don't say it. Don't say it.

Sedgestar blinked.

"I don't know," he said. "Your mother didn't tell me. All she told me was that he wouldn't have you."

Frostmask tensed, her chest heaving as her breathing turned louder. More rapid. More panicked.

"SkyClan did not want two more starving mouths to feed," Sedgestar continued, his voice cold. "But, I could not just leave a dying queen and her sole surviving kit to freeze to death in the snow."

Frostmask jerked back from him, her muscles taunt as her mind seemed to slip away from her body; gone to shelter someplace else. Her thoughts were in chaos, in absolutely no state to do anything but to hide in some dark place where nothing could reach them. However, her body understood innately how to survive, and it was

ready to fight or run from the threat.

Sedgestar blinked, and it was like he was suddenly himself again; his face deeply tired but his amber eyes understanding.

"Frostmask..."

Frostmask turned tail and fled from the den.

She burst back into camp, her pelt standing on end as her heaving breaths echoed in her ears. The clearing had mostly emptied after the meeting. Good. She had no desire for anyone to see her like this. All she wanted right now was to get far away from Sedgestar, far away from everyone, from these cats that *lied* to her. That upended her life. That, even after she gave *everything* to them, still thought so lowly of her, they believed she'd betray them at a twitch of a whisker for some cat that she didn't even know.

Frostmask locked her gaze on the thorn tunnel and raced towards it. Then from the corner of her eye, there was a flash of fur, and she was barely able to pick out its dark red color in the shadows. Autumnleap had waited for her. Of course he had.

"Frostmask!" he said, his voice deep with concern as he rushed to her side. "What's wrong?"

Frostmask whirled towards him, curling her lips up to bare her fangs.

"For once in your life, leave me alone!" she snarled.

Autumnleap stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes widening in confusion and hurt.

"Let her go, Autumnleap," Sedgestar's voice rumbled.

He had emerged from his den and now stood at the base of the Oak Tree, watching her. Frostmask let out a hiss. Sedgestar had no right to say whether or not she could leave the camp. Frostmask ducked into the tunnel, flying into the black forest.

At first, she had no thought about where she was going. She was

just fleeing, running as hard as she could until she could escape the stormy clouds of hurt that raged inside her. But, as her body shifted, tensing and adjusting to carry this new weight of betrayal, another pain filled her, setting her blood on fire. She finally let his name into her mind.

Paledusk.

She snarled her rage at the empty night air as she ran. He was the SkyClan cat. *Her father.* The thought made her want to retch.

And, the worst part of it was that he knew. That way he looked at her that first night— he knew this whole time. He was a liar like the others, but worse. Despite knowing who she was, he tried to drive her away. Tried to hurt her. *On purpose.*

Well... maybe he hadn't known Swoopstrike was her mentor, but he had still killed him.

Swoopstrike.

Frostmask blinked hard before throwing her eyes upwards, scouring the stars that peeked down through the pine boughs with a furious, accusative gaze.

How could you do this to me? How could you lie like the rest? How could Redclaw too?!

Frostmask imagined what Swoopstrike would do if he was here with her. In her mind, she pictured his paw flashing out to cuff her around her ears but not hitting hard enough to sting.

"You daft frog-brain!" he'd hiss. "Why are you so upset? Nothing's really changed. ShadowClan is still your home, and we were just following Sedgestar's orders. Would you have done any differently if you were in our paw-steps?"

Frostmask shook her head, sending the image away. Of course Swoopstrike wouldn't understand. None of her friends or anyone else in ShadowClan could— they were all clan-born. Their loyalty and competence was taken as a given, while Frostmask spent her life proving and fighting and clawing for every scrap of hers. And,

that still wasn't enough for them.

The acidic tang of thunderpath scent hung in the air, and Frostmask jerked her head forward, her thoughts yanked back to her body. During her blind, furious haze, she'd nearly run straight through ShadowClan's territory. Her wounded neck throbbed, she had a headache pounding behind her eyes again, and her paws slowed as her body reminded her mind of her weaken state. Frostmask came to an ungraceful stop, panting hard from the excursion and stress.

Her heavy breathing was the only sound in the forest. It was that time of late night where nocturnal animals had gone back to their nests, but the morning creatures had yet to wake up. The snow around her dampened any noise that might escape the rare creature who was still around, while also keeping away incests, so she didn't even have the songs of crickets for company.

Frostmask hunched her shoulders, wrapping her tail around herself for comfort. Her isolation was profound.

She was close to just collapsing there, giving no regard to the snowy ground or the cold and just letting herself herself wallow in her misery, but then her nose twitched as an unusual scent wafted to her on the breeze, snapping her back to attention. It was the trail left by the SkyClan warriors, already starting to go stale. Frostmask realized she must be close to the tunnel's entrance.

A low growl began to build in her throat, slowly but steadily increasing in volume. Her breathing began to pick up, and her heart began to pound again.

All of this was Paledusk's fault. If her father was just some random rogue or soft kittypet who did not care about the Clans, none of this would've happened. But, instead Paledusk was SkyClan's deputy. He had taken away her clan-mates' trust in her. He'd attacked her Clan, and he'd killed her mentor.

Frostmask sunk unsheathed claws into the snow, hardly noticing its icy bite against her pads because of the hot anger that rolled in her belly. Her legs tensed until they trembled, her fur bristling out around her and her tail lashing.

She blinked, and then she was in motion again.

The next part of her journey passed in flashes. She could hardly focus on anything besides the tightness in her muscles and the pain and fury burning in her chest.

One moment she was still on ShadowClan land, rolling in a pile of leaf-litter and toadstools to disguise her scent. The next she was streaking through the pitch-black tunnel. A moment later, she was slipping through ThunderClan territory, passing through the stream border onto SkyClan land.

It wasn't until she was under a grove of bare, towering oaks in the heart of SkyClan's territory with her mouth open to drink in the scents on the breeze that her mind cleared enough to realize how completely foolish and dangerous this plan of hers was. Then that didn't even matter either when she picked up Paledusk's scent.

Frostmask instinctively slipped down into a hunter's crouch and began to track her prey.

The fire that had been burning in her chest now cooled and froze into fury as cold and sharp as ice. She was a cat turned to stone. She knew what she had to do, and she would not bend or waver. If Paledusk wanted to stop her, he'd have to shatter her.

Her training took over. Her breathing steadied and her senses heightened as she settled into the reassuring, well worn patterns she'd practiced for moons while she shadowed his trail. His scent was fresh. She followed it without issue as it cut cleanly through SkyClan territory.

Her ears pricked as she picked up the sound of the river. Soon, she was able to spot it between the gaps in the trees. It was half-frozen; only a small strip in the middle remained free-flowing, but even that moved lazily as if it was hindered by the ice. She continued down the river, all the while, Paledusk's scent growing stronger. She moved around the thick trunk of a maple, and then she saw him.

Frostmask tensed and froze at the base of the tree, her form hidden in the knobby shapes of the roots. Paledusk was alone. He was

sitting and looking out over RiverClan territory with his back to her, as if he was expecting someone soon.

Must be meeting with Perchpelt again.

Frostmask noticed fresh scratches across his back and her brow furrowed. She hadn't seen him at the attack on their camp, so how had he gotten wounded?

Frostmask gave her head a tiny shake to push those thoughts away. It didn't matter. What mattered was her getting to him before whatever RiverClan cats he was waiting for arrived. Frostmask began to creep closer, placing her paws down as carefully and softly as if she was hunting a mouse.

At the edge of the tree-line, still several fox-lengths away from him, she hesitated. Now would be the perfect time to leap at him. She could tackle him easily, and with surprise on her side, she could maybe even kick him into the river. The thin ice would break under him, and he would go under. The next day, his Clan would find his body washed up on shore, dead from drowning and hypothermia. They would mourn his death as a tragic accident with not a trace of Frostmask or ShadowClan on him.

Frostmask curled her lips back.

Justice. For myself and for Swoopstrike.

Frostmask pressed her ears flat against her head, clenching her jaw... But, her paws didn't move forward.

She looked away from Paledusk's back, and with a hard blink, she felt herself snap out of her dark fantasy.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't kill this cat in cold-blood, without even giving him the dignity of seeing the face of his murderer. She didn't have it in her.

Her gaze flickered back to Paledusk, and a growl began building at the back of her throat, threatening to slip out.

Maybe she couldn't kill him, *but* she wasn't going to let him go so

easily. She would still make him give her some answers about her mother. And, maybe she'd also claw him up a bit. Just to make herself feel better.

Frostmask straightened and brushed her tail against a patch of undergrowth beside her to alert him to her presence.

Paledusk jolted and whirled around at the sound of rustling.

"Who's there?" he demanded, the fur down his back prickling slightly.

The cold fury magnified until it felt like there was a blizzard howling in her. She stepped out of the shadows of the trees, but she made no move to draw closer to him. Paledusk's eyes widened as he spotted her, but then his gaze flickered away from her to the area around her, searching for more enemy warriors waiting. As the moments stretched on though, and he saw no ambush, his harsh green gaze finally settled back on Frostmask. He bared his fangs.

"Trespasser," he growled, his tail lashing. "Why are you here? What do you want?"

A low warning growl rumbled deep in Frostmask's throat.

"You mean you don't recognize me, *Father?"* Frostmask spat the word like it was poison in her mouth.

Paledusk froze then, his lashing tail suddenly completely still behind him.

The growl grew in volume in Frostmask's chest as she started to pace in front of him, her long claws unsheathed and gleaming pearly in the low light. The only mobile part of Paledusk were his eyes. They were round with fear, which sent a jolt of intoxicating vindication down Frostmask's spine, and they never left her form, tracking her as he would a dangerous dog, liable to strike at any moment.

"...Impossible," Paledusk croaked finally, still staring at her.

"Shut up! Don't you dare lie to me again!" Frostmask spat. "You

knew who I was from the moment you first saw me. I look just like *her*. You knew her name!"

Frostmask stopped her pacing abruptly, and Paledusk stiffened, readying himself for an attack, but Frostmask still made no move towards him.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Frostmask snarled in a low voice that vibrated with rage. "I asked you. Why did you lie to me?"

Paledusk was still regarding her like she was rabid.

"Frostpaw..." he meowed slowly.

"Frostmask," Frostmask hissed.

"Frostmask." He corrected himself quickly. "You must understand... I had no idea. Of course, I immediately recognized your resemblance to May. But, I... I didn't know. May never told me that I had any kits."

Now it was Frostmask's turn to freeze. Her brow furrowed as she gazed at Paledusk. He was still staring at her with wide eyes, but his posture was no longer aggressive— he just looked stunned. Frostmask shook her head, clenching her jaw against his words.

"No," she growled. "You're lying. Sedgestar told me that you wouldn't have me. That that's what *May* told him."

Paledusk's eyes went even wider.

"And, you believe him?" he meowed incredulously.

Frostmask swept her tail back and forth behind her, suddenly off balance, but she tried not to let the confusion swirling inside her show on her face.

"I can see you're upset," Paledusk continued before she could say anything, his voice turning soothing. "It seems like you just found this all out from him, Sedgestar. I'm guessing? It must be a lot to take in."

Frostmask didn't respond besides curling her lip up in a snarl. She gave a loud, rumbling growl. She would not allow him to patronize her.

Paledusk seemed to pick up on her sentiment.

"Sedgestar's been keeping this all from you for so long," he said in a neutral voice, dropping the soothing tone. "Why are you trusting that he's telling the full truth about it now?"

"What reason would he have to lie to me about that?" Frostmask growled.

Paledusk inclined his head to the side, arching a brow.

"Isn't it obvious?" he said. "This narrative makes him look better. I rejected you and May, and Sedgestar's the hero that saved you. That would make the idea that he's kept this secret from you your whole life much easier to stomach than the truth— which is that I had no idea about your birth, or that you and May ended up in ShadowClan."

Frostmask's tail twitched, and she growled again. She didn't want to believe him, but doubts about Sedgestar began to pop up and swirl in her head. She knew how cunning her leader was. He could've easily followed the same trail of thought Paledusk laid out.

"But you were May's mate, how could you not know?" Frostmask growled stubbornly.

"Yes, I was," Paledusk admitted. "But, the last time I saw May was in leaf-fall. When you showed up at that first Gathering nearly ten moons later, it had been so long... Of course, I saw May in you, but I thought... I thought you were someone else's. I thought May had taken some other cat as a mate."

"Well, why didn't she go to you in the leaf-bare?" Frostmask snarled at him. "Instead of taking me to ShadowClan?"

Paledusk's tail began to twitch.

"I can't say for sure what reasons May had," he murmured. "But, the

last time we parted in leaf-fall wasn't on the best terms..."

Paledusk broke eye contact for the first time to duck his head, rasping his tongue down his chest a few times as if he was ashamed.

"You see... May and I broke up," he admitted. "I told her that I couldn't keep seeing her. I loved her, but it broke the Warrior Code, and I wanted to be totally devoted to my Clan. It was the most difficult thing that I've ever done, and she was upset, understandably so. But, she didn't want to give up her freedom to join SkyClan to be with me."

Frostmask's ears twitched as her uncertainty rose higher.

Again, what Paledusk was saying made sense. In the few memories Frostmask had about May talking about her father, May's tone had always been wistful and fond. And, yet, Frostmask had been born out in the wildness, not in SkyClan's nursery. But, May didn't seem like she'd been bitter with Paledusk about that... It seemed clear that May had indeed *chosen* to have her out in the forest.

Paledusk inclined his head to the side as if a thought suddenly stuck him.

"Maybe that's what May met by 'I wouldn't have you,'" he murmured. "Because we broke up..."

Frostmask's tail began to swish behind her. She stared at him, at a loss. Earlier, she thought she'd be clawing his pelt off by now, but now she didn't know what she wanted to do.

"...What happened to her?" Paledusk whispered suddenly, making Frostmask blink in surprise. "May."

"She's dead," Frostmask growled.

"I remember you telling me that at that other Gathering," Paledusk said softly. "But, why did she die?"

Frostmask looked away from him for the first time, staring out over the icy river instead.

"Starvation," she meowed flatly. "She was too weak to live, even once we made it to ShadowClan."

Silence hung between the two of them for a few long moments.

"I'm sorry Frostmask," Paledusk said finally, shattering the quiet. "I still loved her, you know. Even when we couldn't be together. If I had known..."

Frostmask shook her head violently, cutting him off.

"Save it," Frostmask growled, locking her gaze back on him. "Whatever you knew or didn't know then, or how things could be different, you're still my enemy now. Your cats just attacked my camp."

Paledusk stared at her in silence for several heartbeats like he was a snowy, green-eyed owl.

"Is that why you came here then?" he asked. "To attack me? To get revenge for the ambush? Or, for me not being there for you?"

Frostmask didn't respond, only lashed her tail.

"I don't want to fight my own kit," Paledusk meowed.

Frostmask bared her teeth.

Why does that matter? It's not like it would've stopped you before. And besides, whether or not we share blood, that doesn't change the fact that you still killed Swoopstrike.

The thought echoed, bouncing around in her skull until it was the only thing in her mind. The image of Paledusk staggering away from Swoopstrike's limp form.

Frostmask sunk her claws deeply into the snowy ground, raking a razor sharp gaze over Paledusk, and for the first time, she noticed at small bundle at his feet. Frostmask's brow furrowed as she looked at it more closely. It was a bundle of mangled herbs. The fur on her shoulders bristled, her stomach clenching as her rage heightened.

Herbs stolen from ShadowClan.

Paledusk followed her gaze down to the leaves.

"These were taken from the ShadowClan camp weren't they?" Paledusk asked, echoing her thoughts.

Frostmask just growled in answer, her muscles tensing as she prepared to spring at him. She imagined raking her claws down his sides, ripping into his ear, shoving him away, grabbing the leaves—

"I'm supposed to pass them off to RiverClan at dawn. But..." Paledusk cast a few quick glances over his shoulder to make sure there were no other cats around, and no RiverClanners on the opposite bank.

Then he reached his paw down and quickly pushed them a tail-length towards Frostmask.

"Here. You take them," Paledusk said. "I'll just tell RiverClan we were unable to retrieve any herbs."

Frostmask froze. Her muscles stiffened in shock and confusion, her gaze flickering from Paledusk to the herbs, and back again. It felt like a trap.

Paledusk rumbled a brief purr, appearing slightly amused by her bewilderment.

"Think of it as proof of my intentions," he said, tilting his head to the side. "I would like things to be cordial between us, Frostmask."

Frostmask didn't respond to him. Worry nipped at her pelt; it still seemed too good to be true. But, ShadowClan *needed* those herbs, desperately...

Ever so slowly, she crept forward, all of her muscles tense and ready to leap out of the way if Paledusk sprung at her. She didn't take her eyes off of him for a moment as she snatched the herbs up in her mouth before rapidly backing up a safe distance away.

But, Paledusk made no move towards her the whole time. Her just

continued watching her with a curious green gaze, as if she was some sort of rare, interesting bug he had found.

"I'm glad we finally got to properly meet, Frostmask," Paledusk said.

Frostmask narrowed her eyes at him in furious slits in response, so he would know that she still hated him. But, her tail betrayed her by twitching with indecision.

The sky was lightening slightly behind Paledusk, heralding the approaching dawn and making Paledusk's white figure glow softly in the low light. She could see his resemblance to her now— the tufted ears, the large, slanted eyes, although his were a vibrant, almost aggressively bright, green, while she had her mother's gentle blue. Frostmask's gaze settled on the scars on his face for a moment, tracing the one left by Swoopstrike that swiped past one of those bright eyes. Giving a soft growl around the herbs in her mouth, Frostmask whirled around and vanished into the forest, pointing her paws back in the direction of ShadowClan's camp.

A Bleak Wind

Morning sun-light fought its way through the branches of the warriors' den as Frostmask blinked awake in her nest. Then she immediately screwed her eyes shut again and hoped that sleep would wash back over her and give her another respite from her miserable existence.

It had been about a quarter moon since the SkyClan attack and since Frostmask learned the truth about Paledusk. When Frostmask had come stumbling back into camp that morning after her confrontation with him, lightheaded and her wounds burning, she had been immediately cornered at the edge of the thorn barrier by Sedgestar and Clearstream. Clearstream had been furious at her for leaving camp, but the medicine cat quieted quickly when Frostmask showed her little pile of herbs she brought back with her.

"I found them scattered in the woods," she'd lied. "SkyClan must have dropped some in their rush to get out of here."

"Marigold and watermint," Clearstream had murmured with a breath of relief. "Thank StarClan, we'll be able to treat some more wounds and coughs."

Then she had locked Frostmask in a fierce stare again.

"I'm glad you found these," she'd said. "But, you better stay in your nest for the next couple of days, because if I've found out you've left it again, by StarClan, I'll pin you to it myself!"

Clearstream had then snatched up the herbs and padded away, leaving just Frostmask and Sedgestar standing together in awkward silence.

"You did well bringing those herbs back," Sedgestar had rumbled in a quiet voice. "And, I want to apologize again for what happened last night..."

Frostmask had already decided not to say a thing about her unsanctioned trip to SkyClan territory, so she just gave a noncommittal murmur, not meeting his gaze. Sedgestar had paused a moment before continuing.

"Now that you know the truth, you may do what you wish with that information," he'd said. "Although, if I may offer a piece of advice: I think it is within your best interest to keep it quiet. Morale is already low enough as is. Cats are angry and looking for something or someone to blame. And, since the meaning of the rotten pine omen still isn't clear... You may make more trouble for yourself if the rest of the Clan finds out."

Frostmask had clenched her jaw in response.

He's probably right about that, but he might also be trying to save his own pelt from the scrutiny of the clan too. I doubt our clan-mates will be pleased to know that he secretly kept half-breed spawn here, right under their muzzles. It's worse than me just being a rogue. I'm also now kin of the enemy.

"...I better get to my nest," had been all Frostmask finally said to him.

Sedgestar had just nodded at that and flicked his tail at her to go.

And, Frostmask had barely left the warriors' den since.

It was true at first that she was recovering from her wounds, but now she felt like despondence kept her in her nest more than anything else. She hadn't even made herself apologize for yelling at Autumnleap yet— she was either asleep or pretending to be asleep anytime he was in the den. She didn't want to deal with anything. Not even him.

Frostmask fell back into an uneasy sleep. She spent the rest of the morning slipping in and out of a shallow rest when suddenly a voice spoke, pulling her back to consciousness.

"Alright, what's with you."

Frostmask cracked an eye open to see the dark figure of Pineshade

standing over her, shadows cast across her face by the light streaming in from the den's entrance behind her.

"I'm recovering from my wounds," Frostmask muttered, closing her eyes again.

"You've barely left your nest in days," Pineshade huffed, her voice annoyed. "And, I know Autumnleap's been bringing you fresh-kill, but you haven't been eating much. Why? You got bit on your neck. Your legs aren't broken and your stomach isn't clawed out. You should be able to get your own prey and eat it at least. So, what's going on? Are you sick? You don't seem sick."

Frostmask ignored her. She just flattened her ears against her head, trying to block out the sound of Pineshade's voice so she could drift back off. Pineshade was silent for several moments, waiting for a response that never came.

"...That does it," Pineshade muttered.

Frostmask gasped, her eyes flying open as she felt Pineshade's teeth grab her scruff. Pineshade hauled Frostmask to the side, forcing her to stumble forward, out of her nest.

"What in StarClan's name is wrong with you?!" Frostmask spat, wrenching herself out of Pineshade's grip and letting out a furious hiss. "You're going to tear my cuts back open!"

Pineshade narrowed her eyes at Frostmask.

"What's wrong with me?" Pineshade echoed with a growl. "What's wrong with you?! Just because my brothers are gonna let you waste away in your nest because they're too soft-hearted to do anything about it, doesn't mean that I am."

"I'm fine," Frostmask growled, trying to step back into her nest, but Pineshade was suddenly in her way, blocking her.

"Oh are you?" Pineshade asked, widening her eyes mockingly. "Well that's great because ShadowClan could really use all of our warriors right now. You know, like with the increased patrolling we've been doing after the invasion? And, because more cats are getting sick

and the sick cats are getting sicker because SkyClan destroyed all our herbs?"

Frostmask felt a rush of guilt prickle her spine. She hadn't known that.

"More cats are sick?" she whispered.

"Yeah, Hootflight and Fogfur have come down now with whitecough too. And, Thornheart's fighting an infection from his wounds. You'd know that if you hadn't been spending the days sleeping all the time," Pineshade said with a scornful growl.

Frostmask flattened her ears, making Pineshade pause before she continued in a slightly gentler voice.

"And, Treefur has recovered, although Buzzardpaw has worsened. Clearstream says he has greencough now and without catmint, there's nothing they can do for him... He doesn't have much time left."

Frostmask's stomach flipped. The battle may be over, but Death was still circling their camp like a vulture. She let out a low growl, shutting her eyes for a moment.

"This is SkyClan's fault," Frostmask muttered. "They're going to kill him just as much as they killed Dawntail."

Pineshade was unusually quiet in response. Frostmask opened her eyes to see Pineshade just watching her with a furrowed brow. Her expression had softened and her amber eyes were now concerned instead of angry or mocking.

"Seriously, Frostmask, what's going on?" Pineshade meowed. "Autumnleap told me that after the battle, Sedgestar talked to you, but when you came out of his den, you were really upset. Then you vanished into the forest until the morning..."

Frostmask looked away from her, her tail twitching. For a brief moment, she wanted to tell Pineshade everything that happened. Sedgestar accusing her. Her learning about Paledusk. Going to SkyClan territory to confront him.

But, the urge was fleeting. The image of Pineshade looking at Frostmask just the way Sedgestar had stopped her. Pineshade might be her friend now, but Frostmask couldn't shake a shadow of doubt from back when Pineshade saw her as nothing but a useless rogue. What if telling her the truth brought all those feelings back? Or, *worse,* what if Pineshade told Dampfang and then the whole Clan knew? She couldn't stand the idea of the whole Clan, or even just Pineshade, thinking she was a traitor or untrustworthy too.

"I've just been really upset about SkyClan, and I wanted some time alone after the battle," Frostmask muttered, semi-truthfully. "The meeting with Sedgestar was nothing important."

"...Really?" Pineshade asked, arching a brow skeptically. "Sedgestar just called you alone into his den to talk about... nothing?"

Frostmask shuffled her paws in the moss, not meeting her eye. Pineshade sighed sharply.

"Okay, whatever," she meowed with an eye-roll.

Frostmask's tail-twitched slightly, but she wasn't sure if she was annoyed at Pineshade's curt attitude or at herself for being secretive, when she was upset at cats that did the exact thing to her...

"But, now that you're up," Pineshade continued briskly. "You should come eat something. It's almost sun-high, and a nice mild day out. I think heading out into camp will do you good."

Frostmask angled her ears back. She didn't want to go into camp. She just wanted to go back to sleep... But from the way Pineshade was looking at her, there was no way she was letting Frostmask back into her nest without a fight.

"Fine," Frostmask grumbled. "But, if I'm not feeling better after eating, I'm going back to my nest. And, you can take it up with Elmclaw or Clearstream if you have a problem with that."

Pineshade shrugged, flicking her tail dismissively.

"Deal," she meowed.

With a twitching tail, Frostmask turned and padded out of the den, squinting as she emerged into the light.

Pineshade was right, and it was a bright, warm day for leaf-bare. The snow had all melted off during the past week, and many ShadowClan cats were out in camp now, eating, sharing tongues and gossiping. If Frostmask didn't look too hard at the still-sealing wounds or the missing pelts of cats who were sick in the medicine cats' den, she could almost imagine it was a normal day in ShadowClan.

As Frostmask padded over to the fresh-kill pile, her legs trembled, suddenly feeling very weak now that they had to hold her up and walk her across camp.

Maybe Pineshade has a point about eating more...

Frostmask narrowed her eyes. When *was* the last time she'd eaten a full meal? The days had all blurred together for the past quarter moon.

Pineshade shadowed Frostmask silently to the fresh-kill pile. She kept hovering around as Frostmask picked up a small mouse and carried it back over to near the warriors' den to eat it. Frostmask took a bite of the prey before shooting Pineshade a pointed look.

"Look, I'm eating," Frostmask mumbled around the food in her mouth. "You can stop watching me like a hawk now."

Pineshade twitched her tail.

"Fine," she sniffed like she didn't actually care.

But as she padded off to settle down with Poolcloud and Dewleaf on the other side of the camp, Frostmask still felt her eyes on her.

Frostmask bent her head and began to eat in fast, mechanical bites. She didn't enjoy the taste of the prey like she normally did, but the quicker she finished her food, the quicker she could get back to her nest without Pineshade or Poolcloud or anyone else bothering her.

Frostmask had just finished her last bite of prey when she heard

footfalls approaching her. She glanced up, expecting Pineshade, but she was greeted by an auburn pelt instead.

"Hey, you're up," Autumnleap said, although he watched her from a few tail-lengths away.

It was as if he was afraid to get too close and have her figuratively claw his whiskers off again, as she'd done that other night. Frostmask dipped her head, rasping her tongue down her chest ashamedly.

She knew she had to talk to him about it, and there was no more avoiding it by pretending to be asleep...

"Yeah, I'm feeling a bit better today," she mumbled before glancing back up at Autumnleap. "Can we talk?"

She shot a glance around at all the cats in camp, sunning themselves in the weak leaf-bare light. She didn't want any gossip about her yelling at Autumnleap getting around anymore than it likely already had.

"Privately," she added in a quiet voice. "Outside camp?"

Autumnleap tilted his head to the side, his brow furrowing.

"Alright," Autumnleap said.

Frostmask hastily scraped dirt over the bones of her meal before rising to her paws and leading the way to the thorn tunnel. She ducked under the brambles, wincing as she felt the thorns scrape her sides and back. It looked like after the attack, the tunnel had been reenforced to be even narrower than usual. Once she made it to the other side, she padded off, relieved that the weakness in her legs had faded after eating. She walked a little ways into the forest, until she could be reassured they were out of the earshot of even their clan-mates with the sharpest hearing.

Frostmask sighed quietly.

Might as well just get it over with and apologize.

Frostmask glanced back over at Autumnleap, ducking her head again in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you—" she murmured.

"What happened? Are you okay?" Autumnleap said, cutting her off before she could continue, causing her ears to prick with surprise.

He was gazing at her with a furrowed brow. He didn't really seem upset, mostly just worried.

"You haven't been acting right at all since you talked with Sedgestar," he explained, seeing her expression. "Withdrawn, lethargic, and it's not like you to yell like that... but I didn't want to press you earlier about it in case you were still... processing whatever it was."

Frostmask blinked hard a few times, her mouth suddenly dry. She flattened her ears against her head as her heartbeat began to pick up.

No. I'm not okay.

As if Autumnleap asking about it broke a dam in her mind, the same terrible feelings from that night surged up inside her, and they threatened to drown her all over again. Frostmask closed her eyes for a moment, her chest heaving as she fought against the tide. She *needed* to keep it together.

Autumnleap studied her with concern. He lifted a paw as if to take a step over to her, but he didn't move, seeming to think better of it. He then took a seat instead and wrapped his tail tightly around his paws as if to keep himself in place.

"You don't have to tell me," he said, his mew gentle. "But, I just want to help."

"I- I- I-" Frostmask attempted, but her voice was shaking too much to form any real words.

Frostmask screwed her eyes shut again.

Snake-dung!

That had betrayed her. Now there was no chance she could fib or brush over it. Autumnleap would still know there was something wrong.

Frostmask opened her eyes to stare down at her feet. She dug her claws into the ground. The feeling of mud beneath her pads helped ground her, and after she forced several deep breathes, she found her thoughts clearing a bit, like sunlight fighting its way through a storm.

Now what do I do? I can't tell him everything, right?

"Can I come over to you?" Autumnleap asked gently.

Frostmask's head jerked up in surprise. She had been so focused on the out-of-control emotions inside her, she'd hardly noticed that Autumnleap had still been keeping some tail-lengths of distance between the two of them.

She blinked. Weirdly enough, she thought maybe that had actually helped her. It had made the feelings seem a little less pressing and overwhelming.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she considered Autumnleap's request. *Could* she handle it if he came over to her? Or, would it make the feelings intensify and choke her?

...I think it'll be okay.

Her emotions still rolled like storm clouds, but they weren't threatening to tear her to bits.

At least at the moment.

Still, it might be nice to have Autumnleap's supportive presence a little closer. After all, he wasn't pressuring her or trying to claw the information from her. It was like he said. He wanted to help her.

But, would he still think that if he knew the truth? That I'm Paledusk's kit.

Frostmask's stomach flipped, but she clenched her jaw and did her best to push the thought away.

She gave Autumnleap a tiny nod. He quickly sprung to his paws as if he had been a coiled snake sitting there, and he was at her side in an instant, pressing his pelt against hers.

His solid form was reassuring and steady, but paradoxically that just made Frostmask's trembling intensify, a whimper threatening at the back of her throat. It was as if him being there made the situation feel very real and not just some terrible nightmare. But, at the same time, she didn't want him to pull away, leaving her alone again. Frostmask turned her head to press her face into the thick ruff of fur around Autumnleap's neck.

"Sedgestar thought I betrayed ShadowClan." The words slipped out of her in a rough whisper before she could even think about them. "That I told SkyClan about the tunnels."

She wasn't sure if her voice had even been loud enough for Autumnleap to hear her, but she felt him stiffen suddenly. She pulled her face away, her heart clenching at the thought of finding suspicion or disgust towards her in his expression, but Autumnleap's amber eyes eyes were flaring with outrage.

"What!" Autumnleap snarled. "How dare he!? I can't believe this. Just because you were born outside of ShadowClan?! You've been here practically your whole life! You're a loyal warrior! How can Sedgestar blame you for that?!"

Frostmask blinked and nodded along mutely. Thoughts of Paledusk and SkyClan whirled in her head, and for a moment, she almost told Autumnleap about that too. But, then she felt the cold doubts that she had pushed away earlier return in greater numbers. Frostmask bit the inside of her cheek.

If Autumnleap knew that Sedgestar did that, not because I was born a rogue, but because I am half-SkyClan... would that change things? Would he start to doubt me too?

Frostmask closed her eyes for a brief moment.

And, me going onto SkyClan territory... that looks bad doesn't it? I'd tell him that it was because I wanted answers, of course. That I wanted to ***hurt*** *Paledusk... but would he believe me? The results don't support my reasoning. I did nothing to Paledusk and came back with herbs that he gave me. Maybe Autumnleap would even think I was colluding with him.* ***Snake-dung,*** *why did I do that? That was so stupid of me...*

I can't tell Autumnleap anything, can I?

"I'm going to talk to Sedgestar," Autumnleap growled, getting to his paws and pulling Frostmask from her thoughts.

"No!" she meowed quickly, her eyes widening in a hint of panic. "He's already apologized. You can't make a scene about it because that'll just make things worse. Or, tell *any* of our clan-mates! The rotten pine remember? If they find out Sedgestar was suspicious of me..."

Frostmask's chin bobbed down.

"Well you know what they'll think," she muttered. "Especially with cats like Dampfang in the clan. Even if Sedgestar defends me, I know Dampfang will have them all turned against me before you can say 'mouse.'"

Autumnleap's amber eyes were wide as he gazed at her.

"But, that's not fair!" he protested. "You haven't done anything wrong!"

"Yeah, it's not fair. But, that's just how life is for me," Frostmask said bitterly.

Autumnleap lashed his tail with frustration, scowling. She closed her eyes, a feeling of pain and loss tugging at her paws like a powerful tide.

Nothing about this or the secret is fair. And, it's not fair that I can't even make myself tell Autumnleap the truth, out of fear of what might happen. Is that a weakness in my character or in his? Autumnleap's never done anything that makes me think that he doesn't trust me... But neither did Sedgestar, and look what happened.

Would I be able to go on if Autumnleap, Pineshade, Poolcloud... if they turned against me too? What's left for me then? I can't risk it.

"I'm glad you know at least. And, you don't think I'd want to betray ShadowClan." Frostmask's voice was small as she said the words she wished were completely true.

Autumnleap stilled and softened, sitting back down next to her.

"Of course I don't," he meowed, his amber eyes round and serious.

Frostmask blinked hard, a lump forming at the back of her throat. Pain washed over her as she gazed at him.

I hope you mean that with every hair on my pelt. But, I still can't tell you.

"...How could he do that to me?" she rasped.

Frostmask wasn't exactly sure who she was talking about there: Sedgestar. Paledusk. Redclaw. Swoopstrike... Maybe even Autumnleap or Pineshade or Poolcloud, in the event they betrayed her too. But, the raw wound inside her remained the same regardless.

Autumnleap scooted closer to her to wrap his tail around her supportively, and after a moment of hesitation, she leaned back against his shoulder, taking comfort in his touch. The very real warmth of his pelt helped chase away some of the cold, dark figments of doubt about him in her mind.

"Sedgestar's an idiot frog-brain, that's why," Autumnleap growled in answer, and Frostmask couldn't help but giving a tiny purr.

She didn't think she'd ever heard anyone dare call Sedgestar an idiot before.

"It's true," Autumnleap said, a hint of amusement appearing in his voice at the sound of her purr. "And, I'd say that to his face, if you wanted me to."

"And, it'd get your tongue clawed out," Frostmask muttered, but

there was an edge of dry humor to her words.

"It'd be worth it," Autumnleap asserted, turning his head to rest his chin on the top of Frostmask's head.

They were quiet for a few moments.

"Do you mind if you keep this conversation just between us? I haven't told Pineshade or Poolcloud or anyone else about it..." Frostmask murmured, breaking the silence.

"Poolcloud and Pineshade would understand if you wanted to talk to them," Autumnleap said.

Frostmask's tail twitched uncertainly for a heartbeat.

"Maybe," she said. "But, I'm worried. What if Pineshade tells Dampfang? Or, what if it changes the way they think about me..."

Autumnleap was quiet for a moment.

"I won't talk about it with anyone if you don't want me to," he said finally.

"Thanks," Frostmask murmured into his fur. "Also, I don't think I got a chance to thank you yet for saving me during the battle... I don't know what I'd do without you."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she felt her ears warm, partly in guilt about keeping the secret from him and partly because she was suddenly very self-conscious about how closely the two of them were pressed together.

"Of course," Autumnleap meowed simply.

Faint yowls drifted over to them, causing Frostmask's ears to prick. She straightened as Autumnleap lifted his chin off her head. Both of their pairs of ears swiveled towards the direction of the camp, but Frostmask had deliberately led them far enough from camp that they couldn't hear what was going on.

"Maybe Sedgestar called a clan meeting," Autumnleap murmured.

"Or something's wrong," Frostmask said, her stomach clenching. "Let's go back."

They hurried to the thorn barrier, ducking into the tunnel. When Frostmask emerged into the camp from behind Autumnleap, she let out a soft sigh of relief that everything mostly appeared normal. No cat seemed particularly distressed, however, oddly all her clan-mates' attention was focused on Darkpelt. Darkpelt stood in the center of the camp clearing, leaning his weight on his good legs. Clearstream and Elmclaw had braced his injured leg with sticks like they would a broken one; they'd said that if the elbow joint was reenforced, it might allow it to heal better. It jutted out awkwardly to the side, not quite under him like his other legs were.

"I have an announcement to make," the large warrior rumbled, shifting his weight under the pressure of all the eyes on him.

Darkpelt paused for a moment before continuing.

"My leg injury is severe," he rumbled. "I've been told by Clearstream and Elmclaw that it will take moons, maybe seasons to regain any motion from the joint, and even then, it will likely never fully recover."

Darkpelt hesitated again as if the words were challenging for him to admit out loud.

"And, so I've made the difficult decision to step down from my position as a warrior," Darkpelt said, his tail drooping slightly. "If it were up to me, I'd have loved to serve our clan for many more moons. But, in this current state, I'd just be a liability in a battle, and I can't hunt or patrol right now either."

Frostmask heard a soft gasp of shock and she turned her head to see Dampfang staring at Darkpelt with wide eyes.

"But, Father—" Dampfang began, but Darkpelt didn't give him the chance to say anymore.

"I've made my decision," he said, shooting his son a sharp glance. "And, it was not one I made lightly. Who knows, maybe in six

moons, I'll be able to return to full warriors duties if my leg makes a miraculous recovery... But, if not, well... then that's that."

Sedgestar rose to his paws to give the older cat a nod of respect.

"ShadowClan will always be grateful for your many seasons of service," he meowed. "And, even if your leg doesn't improve, and you end up remaining an elder, I know I will still be coming to you for advice before battles for countless moons in the future."

Darkpelt dipped his head to Sedgestar gratefully. Larkfoot rose to her paws as well to stride to Darkpelt's side.

"I've also decided to step down from my position as a warrior," she announced, her chin held high.

Now Sedgestar blinked in shock as he stared at Larkfoot, his littermate.

"But... we're not old!" he said, his voice aghast.

Larkfoot let out a brief purr of amusement.

"Sure, but we aren't young either," she said, her voice lightly teasing. "And, unlike you, I don't have any extra lives keeping me youthful."

She glanced over at Darkpelt.

"Besides, ever since Dampfang and Dewleaf left the nursery, I've had trouble adjusting back to being warrior again. And, now that Darkpelt's stepping down..." She brushed her cheek against her mate's affectionately, and Darkpelt rumbled a low purr. "I don't think my place is in the warriors' den anymore."

She turned her gaze back to Sedgestar.

"The most fulfilling part of my life has been when I've been raising my kits," she said. "So, that's what I'd like to do. I'd be a permanent queen and help raise all of ShadowClan's kits."

Frostmask gave a small nod of understanding. Frostmask had only

overlapped with Larkfoot for about one moon in the nursery, but even in that amount of time she had seen that the queen was a deeply maternal cat. Larkfoot had treated Frostmask, and all the other kittens who were in the den at that time, like her own—grooming them, playing with them, feeding them, and even paying Dampfang no mind when he had whined to her, confused that she was caring for a rogue like Frostmask.

"And, don't think I'll just be sitting around like a lump either," Darkpelt meowed quickly, pulling Frostmask from her memories. "Even if my leg's never good enough to hunt or fight well, I reckon I'll still learn to get around just fine on three legs once it stops hurting so much. I'll still be able to do things. Like patrol and help guard the camp."

Sedgestar nodded, his surprise at Larkfoot's announcement fading.

"Of course, if that's what you both want," he said, shooting a glance at Larkfoot again.

She nodded without hesitation.

"It is," she meowed.

"I'll hold the ceremonies later today then," he said. "And, have the apprentices set up new nests for you."

Darkpelt and Larkfoot dipped their heads to Sedgestar and headed back off to the edges of the camp. Cats began to turn their attention away from the pair as the pseudo clan meeting came to an end, however, Dampfang strode into the center of the clearing before everyone was able to return to their own activities.

"This is outrageous," Dampfang snarled, lashing his tail.

He turned his gaze onto Sedgestar as if to challenge him directly.

"SkyClan needs to be punished for all the damage they've done to us," he growled. "We've just lost two more warriors because of them, and even more are sick because of the damage they did to our herbs!"

"SkyClan's not forcing your parents to retire," Govepelt's voice cut in softly. "True, Darkpelt was injured in the fight, but it's completely within his and Larkfoot's right to decide if they longer wish to be full warriors. Especially after they've served our Clan faithfully for so long."

Dampfang whipped his head around to stare at the deputy.

"They would not be retiring though, if it wasn't for Darkpelt's leg!" Dampfang snarled, before glaring back at Sedgestar. "It's been a quarter moon. We've waited long enough! It's time for us to strike back!"

A few quiet growls of agreement met Dampfang's words, but Sedgestar silenced them with a swift shake of his head.

"We can't put more lives at risk right now," Sedgestar said with a brief growl. "As you said, we are down cats. Too many of our clan-mates have fallen sick or still too injured to fight."

Dampfang curled his lip up at Sedgestar.

"Are we warriors, or are we mice?" he sneered.

A loud growl rumbled from Darkpelt, snapping Frostmask's attention away from Dampfang.

"Do *not* speak to your leader that way!" Darkpelt snarled, glaring at his son as his pelt prickled in anger.

"It's alright, Darkpelt," Sedgestar said, although he gave him an appreciative nod before glancing back over at Dampfang.

Sedgestar studied Dampfang in silence for a moment with sharp eyes that dared him to challenge him again. Dampfang lifted his chin, refusing to be cowed by the intense heat of his leader's gaze.

"I understand your frustrations, and your desire to get revenge for our clan," Sedgestar meowed. "Believe me, I feel the same way. And, if I was your age, I'd probably be where you are, saying the same thing to my leader right now."

Sedgestar's whiskers twitched in a brief flash of bitter humor, before his gaze darkened again, and he continued.

"However, we need to be strategic about this. The weather is mild today, yes, but don't forget, we are in the heart of leaf-bare. It will still be moons before leaves begin to bud on the sycamores and prey starts to run well again. Say we do strike back now. We take the half of our Clan who's not injured or sick and land a heavy blow back against SkyClan. There will absolutely be injuries, and maybe even more deaths. Now instead of half of our Clan being weakened by injury, everyone is. As leaf-bare stretches on, prey is even harder to find and starvations sets in. Whitecough and greencough take advantage of our weakness and spread. We do not have enough herbs, and our bodies aren't strong enough to fight it off alone. And, that's not even considering if we have any more trouble with the other Clans or outside threats like the rats... I trust you get the picture?"

Dampfang just nodded silently, his ears twisted back. Meanwhile, Frostmask felt her stomach clench and flip at the grim future Sedgestar had just laid out for their Clan.

At this rate, will we even survive leaf-bare?

There was a long moment of silence where Dampfang seemed to gather his thoughts, his twitching tail revealing the fact that his frustrations had not yet totally abated.

"The next gathering is only a quarter moon from now," Dampfang rumbled. "What do you plan to say to SkyClan and RiverClan? Even if we can't attack them yet, surely you can't let this go unchallenged."

"Of course not," Sedgestar said, a hint of a snarl drifting into his voice. "At the full moon, we will gather as much intel as we can on the state of affairs between SkyClan and RiverClan, and we will show them that we are still strong, despite their fox-hearted attack. But, we won't declare war on them. When we strike back, it will be when they are looking the other way."

Dampfang gave another nod, as if he finally accepted Sedgestar's

plan, albeit reluctantly. However, despite this concession, Dampfang didn't immediately pad off. Instead, he remained standing in the center of the camp for a few moments longer, prompting Sedgestar to twitch an ear derisively towards him.

"Have I answered your questions to your satisfaction, Dampfang?" Sedgestar growled. "Or would you also like to tell me how I should organize patrols? Or how to hunt mice?"

Dampfang bowed his head to Sedgestar stiffly.

"My apologies, Sedgestar," Dampfang muttered, although to Frostmask it seemed like there was a soft growl underlaying his words. "It won't happen again."

He turned on his heel then to pad back to the edge of the clearing, heading for the thorn tunnel, and Pineshade intercepted him before he reached it. She whispered something to him that Frostmask couldn't make out, but Dampfang just shrugged her off and ducked under the thorns, leaving Pineshade staring after him with a twitching tail.

A few moments later, the thorn tunnel rustled again, and Frostmask turned to see Redclaw emerge with Lizardpaw and Featherpaw, returning from training for a sun-high rest. The bite wound on Lizardpaw's leg had healed enough for him to preform light duties, so Redclaw and Emberflower had been taking turns training him with their apprentices while Frostmask had still been recovering. At the sight of Redclaw's red and black pelt however, Frostmask felt her stomach turn over, a hot sting of betrayal stabbing at her heart.

She knew Redclaw had been checking on her during the past few days, but Frostmask hadn't spoken to her about that fateful meeting with Sedgestar. Instead Frostmask had just pretended to sleep whenever she was around, like she'd done to Autumnleap.

Truthfully, Frostmask didn't know what to say to Redclaw. Should she confront her or should she hide the fact that she knew the secret? She didn't feel like dealing with Redclaw's deceit right now, but masking her pain would be difficult to pull off...

Frostmask tore her gaze away from Redclaw and to Lizardpaw, forcing her thoughts to focus on her apprentice. She lifting her tail in greeting to him, and Lizardpaw slow-blinked at her affectionately in response. Redclaw dismissed Lizardpaw and Featherpaw, but she and Lizardpaw together still headed over to Frostmask and Autumnleap. Frostmask kept her gaze on Lizardpaw, doing her best to ignore Redclaw.

'Are you feeling better?' he asked. *'Do you think you can start training again?'*

'I'll have to check with Clearstream, but I am feeling better today.' Frostmask signed.

Her mood had lifted a bit after her talk with Autumnleap, although she wasn't sure if it would last. She could still feel the urge to curl up and sleep forever nagging at the back of her mind, although it wasn't as strong as earlier... even if her internal wounds still felt raw.

"What's going on?" Redclaw's meow cut in.

The sound of her voice made Frostmask's jaw clench, but she struggled to keep the turmoil inside from showing up on her face. Redclaw was gazing out at the camp which was still wreathed in stunned silence following Dampfang's very public challenge of Sedgestar.

"Everyone looks like a fox just ran through here," Redclaw joked before her eyes widened as she seemed to realize that after the terrible surprise of the SkyClan attack, she shouldn't rule anything out as a possibility.

"That's not what happened right?" she asked. "Everyone's fine?"

"Yes," Autumnleap reassured her quickly, before explaining Darkpelt and Larkfoot's announcements, and Dampfang's argument with Sedgestar.

"Dampfang has walked around like he owns the whole forest since he was a kit," Redclaw scoffed lightly once Autumnleap was done.

"I'm sure Sedgestar humbling him will only help him out in the long run. But, good for Larkfoot. I know she's been wanting to be back in the nursery for a while."

Autumnleap nodded, and Redclaw turned to Frostmask then, making her stiffen awkwardly.

"I'm also happy to see you out of the den!" Redclaw said with a warm purr. "It looks like you're feeling better!"

"Uh, yeah," Frostmask muttered, doing her best to keep her voice neutral.

But, Redclaw seemed to pick up on her discontent. She tilted her head to the side to study Frostmask with sharp green eyes.

"You *are* feeling better, aren't you?" she asked. "You aren't getting sick, right? Do you feel feverish?"

Redclaw took a step forward to try to touch her nose to Frostmask's, wanting to see if hers was hot, but Frostmask shied away before they could touch.

"I'm fine," Frostmask insisted.

Redclaw blinked at her a few times, her brow furrowed.

"I think Frostmask is still just feeling a bit tired and weak. But, overall she's getting better. Right, Frostmask?" Autumnleap jumped in quickly.

Frostmask glanced over at him, and her blinked at her knowingly.

He's covering for me. He thinks I'm just still upset about Sedgestar, and I don't want to talk about it with Redclaw.

Frostmask dipped her tongue to flatten a piece of her chest fur, guilt prickling her pelt. She couldn't help but feel like she was taking advantage of Autumnleap's good nature.

"Yeah, right," she murmured.

Redclaw continued staring at her, looking very unconvinced. As Frostmask looked back at Redclaw, the rolling tide of hurt, anger, and sadness in her gut increased, until she felt like she couldn't stand there with her for a moment longer.

"Speaking of which, I think I'm going to go back to my nest for a bit," Frostmask murmured, giving quick nods of goodbye to Autumnleap, Redclaw, and Lizardpaw.

'Feel better soon!' Lizardpaw signed.

Frostmask paused for a moment to gently bunt her head to his in response, before she turned to walk to the warriors' den, forcing herself not to hurry. She sighed in relief as she brushed into the den and out of the sight of Redclaw's prying gaze. The den was empty, with everyone out enjoying the warmer day, and the peacefulness of it calmed Frostmask as she made it to her nest. She curled up, brushing her tail against her nose and closing her eyes. However, her solitude was interrupted only a few moments later when Frostmask heard the bush rustle as another cat entered the den. Frostmask made the mistake of opening an eye to see who it was, and her gaze met Redclaw's.

Snake-dung, now she knows I'm awake!

Frostmask closed her eyes again regardless, hoping Redclaw would leave her alone if she saw that Frostmask was trying to sleep. However, Redclaw was Pineshade's mother... and Frostmask knew, like Pineshade, Redclaw was much too stubborn for her own good most of the time.

"Is everything alright with you?" Redclaw's gentle voice asked.

"Fine. Just tired," Frostmask muttered tightly, not opening her eyes.

"I know you Frostmask," Redclaw said, her tone still gentle but more insistent this time. "I can tell when something's wrong."

A sudden surge of cold anger overtook Frostmask, and she opened her eyes to meet Redclaw's gaze.

"Oh, I *know* you know me," Frostmask growled in a low voice.

"More than I know myself apparently."

Redclaw's eyes widened.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, her nose scrunching in a faint scowl.

Frostmask gave her ears a twitch.

I shouldn't've said that.

She didn't want to talk about this right now. Frostmask curled up again, screwing her eyes shut tightly and didn't respond. As the moments of silence stretched on, Frostmask dearly wished that Redclaw had just decided to leave her be, but those hopes were dashed as Redclaw spoke again, her voice more firm this time.

"Frostmask. Tell me what's going on."

Frostmask stiffened, and she opened her eyes to glare accusatively up at Redclaw. It seemed like there would be no escaping this conversation.

"Sedgestar told me the truth," Frostmask growled. "About SkyClan."

Redclaw's eyes widened, and Frostmask knew she understood that Frostmask wasn't talking about the attack. Redclaw's mouth opened slightly like she wanted to say something, but she didn't try to deny it.

"...How long have you known?" Redclaw rasped finally.

Frostmask tore her gaze away from Redclaw to stare furiously at the den wall instead. She was well aware that her clan-mates were just outside, so she spoke in a very low voice.

"Since the night of the attack," Frostmask growled. "Sedgestar accused me of being the one that told them about the tunnels. But, I had no idea about SkyClan until he told me."

"Sedgestar accused you of *what?"* Redclaw snarled, and Frostmask glanced back over at her, surprised at the intensity of anger in her

voice.

"Why'd you never tell me?" Frostmask hissed, brushing past Redclaw's last statement.

Redclaw blinked, and the outrage in her eyes about Sedgestar dimmed to sadness.

"It wasn't up to me," Redclaw murmured. "Sedgestar—"

"I know. He told you to keep it a secret." Frostmask cut her off with a low growl. "But, didn't you think I had a right to know? What's the point of keeping the secret from me to ensure my loyalty, if you all are just going to hold it over my head and doubt me anyway?"

Redclaw's eyes widened, and a flash of hurt appeared in their green depths.

"If Sedgestar truly believed that you would betray ShadowClan, then he has tadpoles in his brain," Redclaw said in a hushed voice. "But, I've never once doubted you, Frostmask. You're practically my daughter!"

"But, I'm *not,* right?" Frostmask growled, the fur down her back bristling. "That's the problem. I never was apart of your family, not really. I mean, it took *seasons* for Pineshade to come around to me. And, even Poolcloud went along with her the whole time we were in the nursery!"

"I tried my best!" Redclaw protested, her ears flattening. "I spoke with Poolcloud and Pineshade countless times. I never wanted you to feel excluded—"

"But, I still did!" Frostmask hissed, cutting her off. "You knew that I never really belonged in ShadowClan. Or, in your family with you and Weaseltail and your *real* kits. And, the fact that you kept this secret just proves it!"

Redclaw blinked in stunned silence. Frostmask glared at her for just a moment longer before she turned her back on her, curling up to face the opposite way. Frostmask screwed her eyes shut, determined to ignore Redclaw until she left. Several long moments stretched by,

and the only sound Frostmask heard was her own blood roaring in her ears.

"...I'm sorry that I've failed you, Frostmask," Redclaw whispered finally, pain clear in her voice. "Just know that I've always loved you as much as I loved the rest. And, I still do."

Frostmask pressed her ears flat against her head, a lump forming in the back of her throat as the sound of Redclaw's paw-steps retreated. Only after Redclaw left the den and the rustling of the bush silenced, did Frostmask give into the painful emotions. Her shoulders began to shake, and she bit back a choked sob that threatened to slip out of her jaws. Grief, anger, and even some guilt that she'd hurt Redclaw's feelings warred in her chest, as if they were all working together to destroy her from the inside out. Frostmask curled herself into the smallest, tightest ball she could manage and prayed for sleep to come quickly.

The Opener

The rising full-moon cast silver light down on an uneasy camp. Frostmask fluffed her fur out against the cold as she watched her clan-mates murmuring and shooting uncertain glances to each other. It was a little after sun-down, so ShadowClan would be leaving for Fourtrees soon, but the mood in camp was quite the opposite of the excitement that normally foresaw gatherings. For the first time in Frostmask's life, ShadowClan would be walking into a meeting with two overtly hostile clans. The idea of brushing pelts with cats who only a little while ago ransacked their camp was setting everyone on edge.

Frostmask's gaze tracked across the clearing, and her eyes narrowed for a moment as they rested on Redclaw's tortoiseshell pelt before she looked away. Frostmask had returned to her warriors duties a few days after her conversation with Redclaw, but they had not spoken since. It seemed clear that Redclaw was trying to give her space, which Frostmask was grateful for, but Frostmask also knew that the situation was unsustainable. With their apprentices being littermates, Lizardpaw and Featherpaw would soon wonder why they weren't training together anymore. Frostmask tail twitched. Still, she couldn't say how long it would be until she felt ready to forgive Redclaw.

She sighed, giving her head a small shake as she tried to direct her thoughts away from her. Frostmask's eyes continued their journey through the camp to now rest on Lizardpaw's white pelt. He was sitting with his litter-mates close to the entrance of the medicine cats' den, watching the entrance of the cave intently. Hollowpaw, Cedarpaw, Cicketpaw, and their father Dustleap were inside. Clearstream had made a quiet announcement earlier that Buzzardpaw would pass soon, and his family had gone in to say goodbye. Lizardpaw and his littermates were now waiting outside in quiet support of their den-mates.

Frostmask's ears twisted back, her gaze resting on Lizardpaw.

Buzzardpaw's death felt so pointless. He was so young, with the promise of a full life in front of him, and yet it was ended prematurely because ShadowClan didn't have the proper herbs to cure his disease.

Frostmask closed her eyes for a brief moment, her chest tightening.

The hardship of this past moon was almost unbearable, and with the rest of leaf-bare looming over them, she knew it was far from over. All she could do was hope that she and the ones she cared about would have the strength to make it through.

Frostmask forced a deep breath, easing the tension in her chest some as she composed herself for the night. She and Lizardpaw had both been chosen to attend the gathering.

Frostmask scowled faintly to herself. She figured it was another way Sedgestar was trying to apologize and show that he trusted her, but she didn't feel moved by the gesture. She might've even declined attending, if it wasn't for Lizardpaw. This was his first gathering, and she knew he was looking forward to it, despite the dark mood that hung over the clan like a rising storm.

And, Buzzardpaw's death will surely sour the occasion even further.

Frostmask's tail twitched as her mind turned to Paledusk. She wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing him either. She hoped he wouldn't approach her— as far as Frostmask was concerned, there was nothing more for them to say to each other.

"Any news?" a low voice asked, snapping Frostmask out of her thoughts.

She turned to see Sedgestar approaching her. In a colossal act of self-control, Frostmask squashed the urge to narrow her eyes at him derisively. Instead, she just flicked her gaze back towards the medicine cats' den.

"About Buzzardpaw," Sedgestar added when she didn't immediately respond.

"No," Frostmask murmured with another tail twitch.

She heard the sound of Sedgestar sitting down next to her even though she still refused to take her gaze off of the Clanrock to look at him.

"We won't leave for the gathering until it's over," he said. "If that makes us late, so be it. The other clans can wait on us."

Frostmask just nodded in response, her gaze drifting over to Lizardpaw again.

"You'll have to watch out for him," Sedgestar murmured, following her gaze. "I know all apprentices are excited for their first gatherings, but with Lizardpaw's disability..."

"You don't have to worry," Frostmask meowed curtly. "I won't let anything happen to him."

At this point, Frostmask hardly noticed the fact that she communicated with Lizardpaw silently rather than with her voice. But, she knew that the other Clans would immediately see him and his paw-signs as odd. Her stomach clenched at the thought of Lizardpaw being mocked for it by the warriors and apprentices he came across. Or worse... being called out for it by a leader in front of everyone, as Frostmask had been for her rogue blood when she was just an apprentice.

"Good," Sedgestar said with a nod. "Also, I wanted to tell you that Redclaw came to speak to me a few days ago."

This made Frostmask finally look over at him, her eyes widening slightly in surprise.

"I thought you decided not to tell anyone," Sedgestar meowed, his voice mild and his amber gaze unreadable.

Frostmask shrugged, trying to project indifference, although she felt the fur on the back of her neck starting to bristle defensively.

"She already knew. I don't think it really counts," she pointed out. "And, besides. I didn't decide either way what I was going to do. You told me that I could tell anyone, if I wanted."

"Yes," Sedgestar agreed, inclining his head towards her slightly. "That is still true. Although if you are planning on making it common knowledge to the clan, it may be best coming from me. I could hold a meeting about it."

Frostmask's eyes narrowed, and she repressed the urge to growl. Even though Sedgestar had told her that she had every right to do with the information what she wished, it seemed like that wasn't entirely true. He was still trying to manage or control the secret even now. Even when it belonged to her.

Maybe Paledusk has a point about Sedgestar's manipulations.

Frostmask sent the thought away with a flick of her ears. She couldn't linger on it now— Sedgestar was too good at reading others for that.

"I didn't decide that," Frostmask said cooly. "I haven't even told anyone else yet. I just wanted to talk to Redclaw about it."

Sedgestar nodded.

"You're upset with Redclaw for keeping it from you," he said.

Frostmask twitched her tail in a manner which said *'Obviously,'* but she didn't respond.

"If it makes you feel any better, when she met with me, she practically clawed my whiskers off," Sedgestar meowed, a hint of amusement appearing in his voice.

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

You deserved it.

But, she still didn't say that, or anything, out loud. Sedgestar rose to his paws, seeming to accept that he wouldn't get anymore conversation out of her.

"Keep your eyes and ears sharp at the gathering," he meowed over his shoulder as he began to pad off. "I want everyone on the lookout for any of SkyClan's or RiverClan's motivations or weaknesses."

Frostmask gave a curt nod, and she watched as Sedgestar headed over to where Grovepelt and Emberflower were sitting together, deep in conversation. Frostmask turned her head away from him as a new set of paw-steps approached her. Autumnleap came over to her side, greeting her with a gentle bump of his forehead against the side of her face.

"Hey," Frostmask said in greeting, relaxing some as he settled down next to her.

"I saw Sedgestar talking to you," Autumnleap meowed, angling his ears towards the leader. "What was that about?"

Frostmask felt herself tense back up again.

"Nothing really. I think he's still trying to make me feel better for what he did." Frostmask's tail twitched. "I think that's the whole reason he invited me to this gathering. He's trying to win me back over."

"You still sure you don't want me to talk to him?" Autumnleap said with a small growl, his gaze searing holes into Sedgestar's back.

Frostmask brushed her tail along his flank in a soothing gesture.

"It's okay. I'm dealing with it," she murmured. "I just wish that I wasn't going to this dumb gathering. Or, that you were coming with me at least."

Autumnleap glanced away from Sedgestar to look at her.

"Well, I don't blame Sedgestar for wanting to keep a big guard at the camp," Autumnleap said. "I mean, I know tonight's a truce, but I wouldn't put anything past those fox-hearts."

He inclined his head to the side.

"Although, why don't you want to go to the gathering?" he asked.

Frostmask's ears flattened against her head.

"Well for one thing I don't like feeling like Sedgestar's manipulating

me," she said with a soft growl. "Like 'I let you go to the gathering, and in return you forgive me for accusing you of betraying the clan.' It's not that easy. And, also..."

Frostmask hesitated, her thoughts turning to Paledusk, but she couldn't tell Autumnleap about that.

"Also I just don't want to see any of SkyClan's ugly-dog faces," she growled instead, lashing her tail.

Autumnleap chuckled lightly, pressing his pelt against her side.

"Put your claws away, tigress," he teased. "I doubt Sedgestar would be pleased if you attacked a SkyClan cat and broke the truce."

Frostmask twitched her tail.

"Of course I wouldn't start a fight," she grumbled. "But, if a SkyClan cat goes for one of us first..."

"Then I'm sure you'll have all of ShadowClan's blessing, and StarClan's as well, to tear them to shreds," Autumnleap said lightly with a purr, giving her cheek a gentle lick and making all of her thoughts screech to a stop.

Frostmask cleared her throat and tried to cover her suddenly prickling pelt by bending her head to groom her chest fur with a few swift strokes. A moment later, Poolcloud and Dewleaf came trotting over to them, offering Frostmask a welcome distraction.

"Hey guys," Poolcloud meowed before settling down on the ground in a crouch next to them, carefully tucking his paws under himself.

Dewleaf nodded in greeting, taking a seat next to Poolcloud as well and leaning herself into his fluff.

"You ready for the most awkward gathering in history?" Poolcloud said, his gaze resting on Frostmask.

Frostmask sighed.

"Let's just get it over with," she meowed, her tail flipping behind

her.

"Resignation— that's the spirit," Poolcloud teased, giving a brief purr.

"I'd like to think of it less as 'resignation' and more as 'stoic dignity,'" Dewleaf said, flicking her tail against Poolcloud's flank.

"In that case, you should go to the gathering instead of me," Poolcloud responded, his gaze sparkling.

"Why is that?" Dewleaf purred, her green eyes warm.

"Well, I'm pretty sure Sedgestar is trying to project an image of resilience and strength," Poolcloud said drily. "And, not an image of a bunch of cats just huddling around, waiting for the worst."

Dewleaf snorted, shaking her head in mock exasperation. Poolcloud flashed a glance at Frostmask.

"No offense," he said quickly with a purr as he remembered she was going to the gathering too. "I was talking about myself really."

Frostmask shrugged.

"None taken, I feel the same way," she responded.

"Why do you two have to be such downers," Autumnleap broke in, giving a playful eye-roll. "Where's Pineshade when you need her to knock some sense into you fluff-brains?"

Frostmask tilted her head to the side, musing on Autumnleap's question. Where was Pineshade? She hadn't been chosen for the gathering patrol, but Frostmask couldn't spot her hanging around the edges of the camp either.

"I think she went for a walk with Dampfang a little while ago," Poolcloud said, answering Frostmask's curious look. "I think she was trying to distract him. He seemed pretty sulky that he wasn't chosen for the gathering."

"Like Sedgestar would've been frog-brained enough to pick him

after his outburst a few days ago," Dewleaf scoffed, flicking her ears. "Sedgestar knows better than to reward my brother's bad behavior."

"I've got to give him props for having the guts to stand up to Sedgestar like that though," Poolcloud meowed, giving a half-joking shudder. "I'd never be able to do that. Sedgestar's too scary."

"No, you're plenty brave enough," Dewleaf argued back, her tail twitching. "You just understand that Sedgestar deserves our respect."

She glanced at Autumnleap and Frostmask as if looking for support, but neither of them responded right away. Frostmask looked at Autumnleap as he glanced to the ground, giving a non-committal mutter. His gaze then flickered to Frostmask's, and she understood, that like her, he was thinking about Sedgestar's accusation of her. Frostmask broke eye-contact with him to stare down at her paws, also avoiding Dewleaf's prompting gaze.

"It's probably for the best that Dampfang isn't going to the gathering anyway," Autumnleap said before the pause could stretch on too long and turn awkward. "He's not well known for his ability to keep his claws sheathed."

Dewleaf sighed.

"I just wish Dampfang didn't have such a big head, and he wasn't so stubborn," she complained. "He could be a brilliant warrior, if only he listened to what other cats had to say a fraction more of the time, instead of always believing that what he thought was right."

Poolcloud nodded in agreement, but Frostmask just twisted her ears back. Dampfang was brave and a good fighter all right, but from her perspective, his personality needed a bit more tweaking than just the few things Dewleaf suggested to make him a good warrior.

"I think Pineshade's good for him at least," Dewleaf added, tilting her head thoughtfully. "She's the only one he listens to. I mean, besides Marshnose and Darkpelt of course."

Autumnleap rolled his eyes again.

"And, even then, he barely takes what she says into account," Autumnleap pointed out.

"Sure, but 'barely' is better than 'never,'" Dewleaf countered with a flick of her tail. "You gotta take the small victories with Dampfang."

Frostmask's attention drifted away from their conversation as, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Elmclaw emerging from the medicine cat's den. The many injuries he had received during the fight had started to seal over, but he was still missing large patches of fur on his sides.

The camp quieted as the eyes of the clan turned to the medicine cat, everyone knowing what he was going to say, but dreading it anyway.

"Buzzardpaw hunts with StarClan now," Elmclaw rumbled, his green eyes clouded with grief and anger as if he blamed himself for not being able to save the apprentice. "We will bring his body out for vigil."

A murmur of sadness passed through ShadowClan. Dewleaf and Poolcloud gazed at each other with wide, sorrowful eyes. Frostmask bowed her head, and Autumnleap sighed, pressing his pelt against hers again.

Sedgestar rose to his paws.

"He's with his mother again," Sedgestar said. "Dawntail will watch over him and guide him to our ancestor's hunting grounds."

Sedgestar cast a glance up towards the clear, cloudless sky.

"We will hold his death ceremony when we return from the gathering," he meowed. "There's no rush— the path to the stars is clear tonight."

Sedgestar called the gathering patrol to him with a wave of his tail. Frostmask rose to her paws and reluctantly stepped away from the warmth of Autumnleap's side. She touched her nose to his ear in

farewell.

"I'll see you soon," she said, pulling away.

He nodded, giving a soft purr, but that didn't hide the deep weariness that had appeared in his eyes after the announcement about Buzzardpaw's death, as it had for many of her clan-mates. Frostmask nodded goodbye to Dewleaf, and she and Poolcloud trotted over to the group together. Lizardpaw appeared at her other side quickly, but his eyes were also dulled in sadness. Frostmask lay her tail over his back in a supportive gesture.

'Stay close to me at the gathering. You never know what those fox-hearts might do,' she signed to Lizardpaw, feeling the ghost of Swoopstrike in her words.

Lizardpaw nodded, his expression turning steely.

Sedgestar flicked his tail, and the ShadowClan patrol followed him out of the camp.

The journey through the dark forest passed in an uneventful blur, and soon enough the ShadowClan patrol crouched at the top of the ridge that led down to Fourtrees' hollow. As Sedgestar had expected, it looked like ShadowClan was the last to arrive; the clearing already seemed full to the brim with cats. Sedgestar flicked his tail, and ShadowClan streamed down the hill in a rolling wave, before coming to a sudden stop at the edge of the clearing. The patrol grouped together loosely, reluctant to mingle with the other Clans. Only Sedgestar and Grovepelt ventured into the crowd so they could head towards the Great Rock.

"Look who finally decided to show up," a nearby grey warrior sneered at the ShadowClan patrol.

He was RiverClan cat, judging by the sleekness of his fur and the fish-scent radiating off his pelt. Dappledpelt whirled towards him, giving a loud hiss and lashing her tail. Emberflower was standing at her side, and Frostmask knew that if this was another gathering, Emberflower might have quietly scolded Dappledpelt for such overt hostility. But not tonight— this time, she shot the RiverClan tom a

poisonous stare. The grey tabby warrior opened his jaws as it to snap something back at Dappledpelt, but his eyes widened slightly as he noticed that the entire ShadowClan patrol raking gazes as sharp as thorns over him. The grey tom clamped his jaws shut and rose to his paws to stiffly pad away.

Their patrol turned away from him and grouped even more tightly together, murmuring angrily among themselves like a disturbed beehive. When Frostmask glanced away from the retreating form of the RiverClan tom, she found herself suddenly surrounded by apprentices. Featherpaw and Yewpaw had come over to join Lizardpaw, and the three young cats were gazing around at the sea of pelts with wide eyes.

"Are we allowed to talk to anyone?" Featherpaw asked with accompanying paw-signs for Lizardpaw's sake.

She shot an uncertain glance back at their hostile patrol before her gaze flickered out towards the other clans. Her expression was curious, but the fur down her back also prickled with apprehension.

Frostmask followed her gaze out into the crowd.

'Yes we can.' Frostmask signed. *'It's a truce, so we should be able to talk to anyone, although it'd be best to avoid RiverClan and SkyClan for this gathering.'*

Frostmask paused for a moment, considering their options.

'Let's find some ThunderClan cats,' she decided. *'They're the least snake-hearted of the bunch.'*

The apprentices nodded, gazing at her for direction. Frostmask shot a glance back at their patrol. A few other cats had decided to brave the crowd, but it seemed clear that most of ShadowClan would be sticking to their own clan-mates tonight.

Frostmask was unsure of how she had suddenly became in charge of three apprentices instead of one, but she still led the way into the crowd, making sure the apprentices were all close to her as her gaze scanned the area for familiar pelts. A little ways away, she spotted a

brown tabby, and her ears pricked, recognizing the ThunderClan apprentice Screechpaw. She flicked her tail at the apprentices to gesture for them to follow, and she trotted over to him, Lizardpaw, Yewpaw, and Featherpaw trailing behind her.

"Screechpaw!" she called.

Screechpaw was talking to a dark brown tom next to him, but his ears pricked at Frostmask's voice. He turned towards her and his amber eyes brightened as he recognized her.

"Frostmask!" he meowed, giving her a respectful a head dip as she padded up to him. "It's been a while."

"It has," she agreed with a friendly nod in response. "I hope prey's been running well in ThunderClan."

Screechpaw's gaze darkened slightly.

"Not as well as it could've been," he said with a growl. "But, I'll let Morningstar explain that."

Frostmask's brow furrowed at his dark tone. But, before she had time to dwell on it, Screechpaw's gaze flickered to the three apprentices hanging back shyly behind Frostmask.

"Hello," he meowed to them with a friendly blink.

Frostmask turned to introduce the three.

"This is Yewpaw and Featherpaw," she said along with paw-signs, flicking her tail towards them in turn. "And, my apprentice Lizardpaw. They've been training for about a moon and a half. It's their first gathering."

"Hi," Yewpaw and Featherpaw chorused, while Lizardpaw gave a polite nod.

Frostmask could see that Screechpaw was gazing at her paw-signs curiously, but he didn't say anything about it, just turning to incline his head towards the dark brown tom at his shoulder, who had been silent thus far.

"This is my brother Barredpaw," Screechpaw said.

Barredpaw gave them a nod.

Lizardpaw touched his tail against Featherpaw's shoulder and signed to her.

"How do you know Frostmask?" Featherpaw interpreted, turning to gaze at Screechpaw, her eyes wide and curious.

"We fought together in a battle..." Screechpaw said, his brow becoming more furrowed as Featherpaw signed as he spoke, interpreting his words for Lizardpaw. "... I'm sorry, what are you doing with your paws and tail?"

"She's translating for Lizardpaw," Frostmask answered for her. "Lizardpaw is deaf so we communicate with him mostly through a language we call 'paw-sign.' He developed most of it himself when he was only a kit. He's very clever."

Frostmask did her best to keep her voice neutral as she explained, although she already felt some hairs down her back stiffen defensively. Thankfully, Screechpaw just looked mostly curious. But, then Barredpaw leaned around his brother, his brow furrowed as his gaze flickered from Frostmask to Lizardpaw and back.

"He's training to be a warrior, you said?" Barredpaw asked. "Aren't you worried about him getting hurt in a battle?"

Frostmasked blinked.

"I worry about all my clan-mates getting hurt," she responded icily.

"Yes, but—" Barredpaw insisted.

"Lizardpaw can fight just fine," Yewpaw growled, leaping to his brother's defense. "He's deaf, not *frog-brained."*

Barredpaw scowled, meeting Yewpaw's glare as the two apprentices sized each other up. Lizardpaw's ears had twisted back, his expression clearly uncomfortable, but Frostmask wasn't sure if he had picked up on that they were arguing about him. Screechpaw

touched his tail-tip to Barredpaw's shoulder soothingly, clearly trying to defuse the situation.

"Developing a whole new language is very impressive," Screechpaw meowed, turning back to the ShadowClan cats. "Anyway, do you guys want to hear the rest of the battle story?"

"Yes!" Featherpaw said, while Lizardpaw nodded after she interpreted Screechpaw's question for him. Yewpaw still shot Barredpaw a sour look, but after a pause he nodded at Screechpaw as well.

As Screechpaw described the battle against SkyClan for the ThunderClan camp, embellishing a few parts, (Frostmask certainly did not remember *hundreds* of SkyClan warriors falling from the sky like rain) Frostmask's attention began to drift across the crowd. Her gaze made its way to the Great Rock, and she stiffened as her eyes fell on Paledusk's white pelt sitting at the base of it. However, her attention was quickly pulled away as she saw Sedgestar bounding up the side of the Great Rock, where the other four leaders were already waiting for him. Sedgestar shot them all a narrowed glance before settling on the very edge of the Great Rock, the farthest away from them as possible.

"So ShadowClan did decide to come." Rabbitstar's loud voice drifted over to Frostmask, cutting through the sounds of the dozens of voices of the crowd. "I was beginning to think that bog you live in finally decided to swallow you up."

Frostmask pricked her ears to listen for Sedgestar's response.

"Perhaps WindClan should just learn patience," her leader said sharply. "Not all cats are as fidgety and flighty as you."

Rabbitstar studied Sedgestar closely, his eyes narrowing.

"Your tail's in a twist," he commented snidely, surprising Frostmask with his perception. "Normally you like to stick your nose in the air, like you're better than the rest of us. But, tonight you're looking for a fight."

Sedgestar's tail twitched, and he didn't respond. Rabbitstar's gaze flickered around the other leaders. Morningstar was glowering at Fennelstar. Fennelstar's tail was lashing. Willowstar was pointedly ignoring all the other leaders. Rabbitstar's large ears pricked in understanding as he studied the hostility radiating between his rivals.

"Oh. So that's it then," Rabbitstar said, turning back to Sedgestar as a smug expression drifted across his muzzle.

Sedgestar's tail lashed, but before he could do anything, Rabbitstar turned aside, striding to the front of the Great Rock, where he let out a loud yowl that echoed through the clearing. Quiet settled over the Clans as everyone turned to look up at the Great Rock.

"It's another full moon!" Rabbitstar yowled. "Let this leaf-bare Gathering begin."

Frostmask glanced over at the apprentices at her side and gave an approving nod when she saw that Featherpaw and Yewpaw were taking turns interpreting Rabbitstar's words for Lizardpaw. Her attention flickered back to the Great Rock, and she saw Rabbitstar turn to the other leaders. He gazed at the showdown brewing between them with rapt interest.

"By all means, one of you start first," Rabbitstar said, a positively gleeful look on his face.

Willowstar rose herself to her paws with a flourish of her silky striped tail.

"I'll begin then," she meowed smoothly. "RiverClan is doing well. We've had a small outbreak of whitecough, but nothing that our medicine cats can't handle. The fish are still swimming well. The river has not frozen over completely so we haven't had to worry about empty bellies."

Frostmask's eyes narrowed critically.

Is anything that Willowstar is saying about the whitecough true? They wanted our stolen herbs, so is it really nothing they couldn't handle?

Frostmask mused this information around in her head, wondering if she should tell Sedgestar and Grovepelt what she knew about the herbs. She could play it off as overhearing something at the gathering rather than telling them about Paledusk.

Willowstar paused for a moment, and Morningstar glared at her.

"Anything else to report, RiverClan?" he growled, curling his lips back in a snarl. "Like perhaps a *fox-hearted* attack you orchestrated with SkyClan on our territory?"

A muted wave of surprise made it through the clearing. Frostmask's ears pricked in shock. She shot a quick glance at Screechpaw. He was glaring up at Willowstar with undisguised fury. This must have been want he meant about 'letting Morningstar explain.'

Willowstar was silent for a heartbeat longer, making Frostmask wonder if she wasn't going to address Morningstar at all, but then the RiverClan leader continued.

"Oh that messy business," she said breezily with a dismissive wave of her paw as if Morningstar had accused her of looking at him funny rather than attacking his Clan. "My apologies about that. You see, SkyClan was late on their payment for something they owed us, so my warriors were just there to make sure they held up their end of their bargain this time. It's nothing personal."

"Nothing personal!?" Morningstar spat, his eyes outraged. "Your Clan helped SkyClan steal a piece of land that rightfully belongs to ThunderClan!"

Screechpaw snarled as the rest of the ThunderClan cats yowled out their anger along with their leader. All of Morningstar's fur had puffed up in fury, but Willowstar was completely unruffled. She shrugged, her expression nonchalant.

"And, now that land is under SkyClan control," she said. "So, it really sounds like something you should be discussing with Fennelstar and not with me."

"I'll claw that smug look off your face!" Morningstar thundered,

whirling on her.

Willowstar still didn't even twitch a whisker, but Rabbitstar stepped between the two leaders before Morningstar could follow through on his threat. Rabbitstar tsked his tongue loudly.

"Temper, temper!" Rabbitstar chided Morningstar as his eyes shone with malicious amusement. "Don't forget that tonight's a sacred truce."

For a moment, Morningstar looked like he was considering clawing Rabbitstar's face instead, but then the ThunderClan leader whirled around and strode to the front of the Great Rock.

"About a half moon ago, RiverClan and SkyClan worked together to take control of some ThunderClan territory," he announced with a growl. "ThunderClan now considers itself at war with SkyClan and RiverClan and will treat their cats thusly."

ThunderClan yowled out support for their leader, getting a few hostile growls and snarls in response by neighboring RiverClan and SkyClan warriors. Willowstar, however, was still treating Morningstar as if he was nothing but a pesky fly buzzing around her head. Strangely though, Fennelstar also had nothing to say in response to the ThunderClan leader. His frame looked thin and his eyes were tired, as if he wasn't feeling up to his favorite past-time of tormenting Morningstar today.

Frostmask's brow furrowed thoughtfully.

I wonder if he's ill.

Sedgestar strode forward, going to stand next to Morningstar's side.

"ShadowClan also suffered a unprompted, fox-hearted blow from SkyClan with RiverClan's help within this past moon," he growled, his voice as hard and sharp as ice. "Our Clan is recovering well despite the damage they caused to our camp... but we will not let such a raid against ShadowClan remain unchallenged. Any SkyClan or RiverClan cats caught on our territory from this point on will be treated with *deadly* force. Until SkyClan and RiverClan work to

mend the damage they've done to their relations with ShadowClan, my warriors have my full permission to kill any SkyClan and RiverClan trespassers on sight."

Frostmask's ears perked upwards in surprise, and she saw Yewpaw's, Featherpaw's, and Lizardpaw's eyes also widened at Sedgestar's threat. Killing cats just for trespassing seemed a bit extreme... but it seemed like Sedgestar wanted to make it clear that ShadowClan was not to be trifled with. Sedgestar cast a scorching glare at Fennelstar and Willowstar, baring his fangs at them.

"Do I make myself clear?" he said, rumbling a low warning growl.

"An honorable warrior doesn't have to kill to win his battles," Rabbitstar cut in, his thin tail twitching.

Sedgestar whirled on him.

"You stay out of this, Rabbitstar!" he spat. "They nullified their privilege to be treated as honorable warriors when they launched this attack! They also already killed one of our warriors during the raid. We are defending our territory and our home! SkyClan and RiverClan will not have to worry as long as they stay on their lands."

Rabbitstar arched a brow at Sedgestar, curling his lip up as if to sneer something at him, but Sedgestar continued before he could.

"And, if you dare lift a claw to help either of *them,"* Sedgestar growled with a quick glance to Fennelstar and Willowstar. "WindClan will be treated the same."

"Quite right," Morningstar growled in support of Sedgestar, giving him a curt, appreciative nod.

Rabbitstar clamped his jaws shut as his gaze narrowed, his good mood soured by Sedgestar's threat.

"Cats die in battle, Sedgestar," Fennelstar rumbled, his tail twitching but his expression composed. "It's a sad fact of life. We lost a good warrior too, who succumbed to her wounds the morning after the battle."

Sedgestar sneered at Fennelstar, curling his lips up to bare bright fangs.

"I feel no pity for cats who would deal such a fox-hearted attack," he growled.

"Then you should look inward before declaring such things," Fennelstar snapped, some fire returning to his tired eyes. "I know your cats have been trespassing. We were just paying you back in kind."

Frostmask's fur prickled, and she stiffened as she realized, as Grovepelt suspected, SkyClan indeed knew at least a bit about ShadowClan's patrols onto their territory.

"You *liar!"* Sedgestar yowled without missing a beat, his fur bristling. "ShadowClan will not allow you to throw around such baseless accusations!"

Sedgestar spoke with such conviction, Frostmask would've believed him, if she didn't know for a fact that his words were completely untrue.

Fennelstar bared yellowed fangs at Sedgestar.

"Then come make us," he growled in a low voice, his tone clear that he believed ShadowClan was in no state to do so.

Sedgestar gave a low, dangerous growl in return and tense silence fell over the leaders for a few heartbeats.

"...Does anyone have anything else to report?" Morningstar rumbled, casting sharp glares at the other leaders.

Fennelstar glanced away from Sedgestar, giving his head a sharp shake. Morningstar's gaze flickered to Rabbitstar, and he sneered.

"Nothing that could match the absurdity of this farce," Rabbitstar growled.

"Then this gathering is over," Morningstar growled.

He bounded down from the Great Rock first, but signaled Sedgestar over to him with a flick of his tail before the ShadowClan leader could head off. The two peeled away from the rest of the crowd for a moment, their heads bent closely together. Similarly, Willowstar and Fennelstar remained perched on the Great Rock, murmuring together. Only Rabbitstar bounded over to gather his cats to go home. Frostmask watched Sedgestar and Morningstar curiously for a moment, but her view of them was cut off by the crowd of churning cats as everyone began to find their clan-mates or head back to their own territory.

Screechpaw rose to his paws, glancing at Frostmask and the apprentices.

"Seems like our clans have similar problems again," he said with a small growl. "Best of luck to ShadowClan. May StarClan light your path."

Frostmask nodded to him, a bit caught off guard by the formal, respectful goodbye.

"And, yours," she said. "Good luck."

Frostmask gathered the apprentices to her with a wave of her tail, and they began to make their way back over to their clan. Lizardpaw's steps were dragging, his expression troubled. Frostmask glanced at him, but Featherpaw broke in before Frostmask could ask what's wrong.

'Lets go talk to Dad,' she signed to her brothers, nodding to indicate Rowanheart's ginger pelt which had appeared in a gap in the crowd.

Lizardpaw glanced up at Frostmask, and she nodded at him to go on ahead, forcing a cheerful expression to try to lift his mood. Lizardpaw just blinked in reply and trotted off after his litter-mates. Frostmask followed at a slower pace, her thoughts torn between the tempestuous gathering and concern for her apprentice.

"Frostmask." A voice hissed.

Frostmask jerked, her head turning towards the call. Paledusk was

watching her from the bushes that ringed the outside of the clearing, and he jerked his chin at her to indicate for her to come over. Frostmask hesitated, her pelt bristling. Her first instinct was to walk away— go join the rest of her clan who were slowly grouping together to wait for Sedgestar. But, instead, she found her paws carrying her over to Paledusk. Despite herself, she was curious about what he wanted... and she could always tell him to leave her alone and head off if it was nothing interesting.

"What do you want?" Frostmask growled brusquely as she brushed into the undergrowth near Paledusk.

She kept a few tail-lengths of distance between them as she stared at him, her muscles stiff. Paledusk blinked, his whiskers twitching in amusement.

"Hello to you too, sunshine," he said with a teasing laugh.

Frostmask growled over the sound of his purr.

"Don't call me that," she said, taking a seat. "Make this fast or someone will know that I'm missing."

Paledusk tilted his head to the side, growing serious.

"My apologies for the poor joke," he said. "And, I just wanted to talk to you. See how you and your Clan are recovering."

Frostmask's eyes narrowed, immediately on guard.

"You heard Sedgestar. We're fine," she said, tensing.

"You're suspicious. I don't blame you," Paledusk meowed with a tail twitch, and Frostmask blinked, surprised by his candor. "But, my motivations are genuine Frostmask. I'd just like to get to know you."

"Do me a favor and *don't,"* Frostmask growled, getting back to her paws to leave.

Clearly speaking to him wasn't worth her time.

"I have no reason to trust you. You're a stranger and my enemy," she

said.

"And, isn't that a shame?" Paledusk asked, widening his eyes at her appealingly before she could stalk off. "Wouldn't it be better for us to be friends than enemies? For both us *and* our clans? There would be so much less fighting and bloodshed that way."

Frostmask blinked, her tail lashing in confusion.

"You'd say that even though Fennelstar and Sedgestar just got into that fight? Even though Sedgestar just threatened SkyClan with deadly force?" she asked.

"Well his reaction is completely understandable," Paledusk said with a shrug. "I'm sure I'd react similarly in his place."

Frostmask shook her ears, still trying to wrap her head around it.

"But, *why?"* she growled.

"I want to get to know my own blood, and I'd like to be able to help you," he meowed with a warm blink.

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"So you'd be disloyal to your clan?" she pressed. "Like how you gave me the herbs even though it'd put your neck on the line?"

A shadow of a frown drifted over Paledusk's features.

"No. I won't betray SkyClan," he said. "As for why I gave you the herbs, I knew I had a lot of time and pain to make up for, and I wanted you to know that I was serious about doing so."

Paledusk purred, his charm and good humor returning.

"And, besides," he said. "Those herbs were for RiverClan, and I don't think either of us will be lamenting over those slimy eel-hearts."

Frostmask's tail twitched uncertainly.

"In fact, your loyalty to your adoptive clan is something that I

admire about you," Paledusk continued. "I'd never ask you to betray them, and I'd hope you'd respect my loyalty to SkyClan the same. What I'm talking about is mutual gain. There is a way for both SkyClan and ShadowClan to benefit here."

Paledusk's ears twitched, and he lifted his head to glance over at the clearing. Frostmask followed his gaze. The remaining clans had almost all grouped separately now to wait for their leaders.

"But, I think it's time for us to depart now," Paledusk said as he stood. "Take time to think about it. And, meet me back here the night of the new-moon to give me your answer."

Frostmask blinked, but before she could even think of a response, Paledusk strode off, trotting over to the SkyClan group. Frostmask tail twitched as she turned, quickly slipping back over to ShadowClan.

Insecurities

Sedgestar and Grovepelt padded into camp in the late afternoon. At the sound of them pushing through the thorn barrier, Frostmask stirred, straightening from where she had been crouched between Pineshade and Poolcloud near the entrance to the warriors' den. Despite the chilly air, her recent meal and the warm press of their pelts on either side of her had lured her to a half-sleep state, but she easily shook off her drowsiness as she fixed her gaze on their leader and deputy. Poolcloud's ears pricked, and his gaze lifted up off his half-eaten mouse to flick over to them.

"Did they have another meeting with Morningstar?" he asked.

"Yep," Pineshade responded, running her paw across her whiskers as she groomed her face.

"I didn't even notice them leave," Poolcloud said, his brow furrowing.

"Well, it is the third one in just a quarter moon," Pineshade said, her amber eyes narrowing slightly. "Not exactly a novelty at this point."

"You think they've made any progress with ThunderClan this time?" Frostmask asked, stifling a yawn.

The three of them tracked Sedgestar and Grovepelt across the camp with their gazes, watching as their leader's and deputy's tails disappeared into Sedgestar's den.

"No clan meeting. So probably not," Pineshade mewed.

Poolcloud kneaded his claws into the ground anxiously.

"I don't understand why they've been talking so much with Morningstar," he said. "It can't be that complicated, right?

ThunderClan was attacked. We were attacked. Our interests should be aligned."

Pineshade's ears angled back and her brow furrowed.

"I don't like how secretive Sedgestar's being about their meetings, either," she said. "Not letting the clan know what progress is happening or what plans are being made has been setting cats on edge."

Frostmask cast a look at Pineshade out of the corner of her eye. Concern marked her features, and her amber gaze was flicking around camp as if she was searching for a specific pelt.

Frostmask knew that by 'cats,' Pineshade really meant Dampfang. It was no secret that he was still impatient to strike back against SkyClan and RiverClan. Although in this case, Frostmask couldn't help but be sympathetic towards his annoyance. She wasn't happy Sedgestar was leaving the clan in the dark either.

The fur down Frostmask's back prickled as a sudden thought struck her.

Is it me? Because he doesn't trust me; am I the reason that he's not talking about it with the whole camp?

Poolcloud's voice pulled her back to the moment.

"Maybe it's good that we're holding off on an attack for a bit longer. Thornheart's fought off his infection, but other cats are still sick with whitecough," he said, shifting uneasily. "I know that Clearstream and Elmclaw got more herbs from ThunderClan territory, but there's still no catmint. ThunderClan had a poor harvest of it during green-leaf and didn't have any to share."

Poolcloud shot a glance towards the dark entrance to the medicine cats' den in the cleft of Clanrock, his tail twitching.

Frostmask's ears twisted back. She knew that Fogfur, Poolcloud's old mentor, was one of the cats in that den. Poolcloud must be worried sick about him.

"Have you heard anything about more greencough appearing?" Frostmask asked him softly.

Poolcloud shook his head.

"No. But, Elmclaw told me that if a cat has whitecough, there's a chance that it can turn to greencough at any time," he said. "And, the chances increase the longer a cat stays sick."

A dark shadow passed over Poolcloud's face. Frostmask's pelt prickled as the image of Buzzardpaw's frail corpse during his vigil appeared in her mind. She dearly hoped none of her clan-mates would suffer the same fate.

"Have you visited Fogfur recently? How's he doing?" Frostmask said, gently steering the conversation towards what she knew Poolcloud was already thinking about.

Poolcloud sighed.

"He's hanging in there. And, in good spirits. You know how stubborn he is; he's not going to let a little bit of whitecough get him down." A flicker of fond amusement softened Poolcloud's worried features for a moment before his brow furrowed again. "But, I can tell he's been losing weight. It's getting close to a entire moon since he first got sick..."

"Fogfur is a strong cat," Pineshade said firmly. "If anyone can fight it off, he can."

Poolcloud sighed again.

"I hope so. But, I don't think this sickness is exactly something cats can chase off like a fox," he said, lowering his chin to his paws.

Poolcloud gazed at the half-eaten mouse in front of his muzzle, his amber eyes round with despondence. Then he looked away from it as if he couldn't stomach the thought of eating more, even though prey was scarce right now and each bite of food precious.

Frostmask's belly clenched in anxiety for him, and the scar left on her heart from Swoopstrike's death ached.

I hope Poolcloud doesn't have to feel that same pain.

Frostmask pressed her side closer to Poolcloud's and turned her head to rasp her tongue down his shoulder, grooming his thick fur soothingly. Poolcloud rumbled a brief purr of gratitude in response to her efforts, but the worry didn't fade from his eyes. Instead, he stirred and straightened. He nodded down at the half of the mouse.

"I'm going to take this to Fogfur," he said. "He needs it more than I do."

"Alright," Pineshade meowed, looking at Poolcloud with the same worry in her eyes that Frostmask felt for him. "Sun-high's basically over anyway. I should go get Cricketpaw for more training."

"And, I should find Lizardpaw," Frostmask added.

Poolcloud nodded, bending his head to pick up the prey.

"I'll see you guys later then," he mumbled around the food before turning and heading to the medicine cats' den.

As Frostmask and Pineshade walked over to the apprentices' den side by side, Frostmask fur prickled as she felt another pair of eyes on them. Frostmask glanced around camp, quickly finding Redclaw with Weaseltail, the two of them chatting with Larkfoot near the nursery. Redclaw was staring at Frostmask with a mournful gaze, while Weaseltail and Larkfoot continued their conversation, oblivious. Frostmask quickly looked away as soon as her gaze met with Redclaw's. Guilt flipped in her stomach, but she pushed the feeling away, turning her attention back to Poolcloud instead. She cast another glance over her shoulder towards him.

"You think he's okay?" she fretted to Pineshade. "Not wanting to eat isn't like him. What if he's getting sick too?"

Pineshade followed her gaze back towards Poolcloud as he ducked under the lichen and into the medicine cats' den.

"I think he's just worried about Fogfur," she meowed. "But, I'll talk to Dewleaf, and ask her to keep an eye on him."

Frostmask nodded, some of her concern fading. Dewleaf wouldn't let anything bad happen to Poolcloud.

They made it to the holly bush that formed the apprentices' den, and Pineshade stuck her head inside, calling to Cricketpaw with a mew while Frostmask woke Lizardpaw from his nap by stomping a paw on the ground of the den. Then they drew back, waiting for their sleepy apprentices to compose themselves and emerge from the den.

"What are your plans with Lizardpaw today?" Pineshade asked. "Do you want to take him hunting with me and Cricketpaw?"

Frostmask's tail twitched regretfully. Hunting with Pineshade sounded fun, but during their uneventful border patrol around the territory this morning, she'd promised Lizardpaw they'd do battle training after sun-high.

"I think I should do some battle training with him instead," Frostmask meowed. "Sorry."

Pineshade flicked the apology away with a wave of her tail.

"No problem. We can always train together some other time," she said. "Battle training's a good idea."

Pineshade's fur prickled, and her gaze darkened.

"Given the state of the forest, he might need it soon."

Frostmask watched Lizardpaw intently as she crept around the edge of the Burnt Sycamore's clearing, sticking to the shadows of the pines. It had snowed again a few sunrises ago, and the alternating patches of white snow and dark shadow disguised her pelt well. She could see that Lizardpaw's ears were pricked in alertness from where he stood in the center of the clearing, but he wasn't looking in her direction. Maybe he hadn't noticed her yet. Moving quickly, Frostmask slipped into the clearing, trying to stay outside his field of vision. She headed towards the roots of the Burnt Sycamore, her muscles tensing as she expected to find him streaking towards her and pouncing at any moment.

But, her fore-paws slapped against the roots of the tree, their path there undisturbed. Brow furrowing, Frostmask turned to look at Lizardpaw, and he finally whipped around to see her, several heart-beats too late.

Frostmask's tail twitched. In this training exercise, Lizardpaw was supposed to be guarding the Burnt Sycamore, and when he spotted Frostmask, he should attack her to stop her from getting there. But, in the three rounds that they've tried it, Frostmask had managed to slip past him undetected each time.

Lizardpaw's ears flattened down as he realized he failed again, and he came padding over to Frostmask, his tail trailing in the muddy ground. Frostmask's twitching tail stilled, her annoyance evaporating when she saw how glum he looked.

'Let's try some different training,' she signed. *'We can spar together.'*

Lizardpaw just nodded and sighed, his blue eyes downcast. Frostmask flicked her tail to motion for him to follow, and she led them away from the base of the Burnt Sycamore and into the more open clearing area. Frostmask turned back to face Lizardpaw, and she stretched out her legs, readying her muscles before she settled into a crouch.

'You attack first,' she told Lizardpaw.

He nodded again, his shoulders tensing. In a flash, he was lunging at her. Frostmask pirouetted smoothly out of the path of his charge, kicking a paw out as she did so to trip him. Her paw successfully connected with a leg, and Lizardpaw stumbled. He recovered quickly, although not quickly enough. Frostmask was already out of his line of sight, behind him. His head jerked around in confusion as Frostmask pounced on him, forcing him to the ground. After a momentary struggle, he went slack, simply allowing Frostmask to pin him to the earth. Lizardpaw gazed up at her with eyes dull with frustration and disappointment. Frostmask stepped off of him, allowing him to rise and shake the dirt from his pelt.

She tilted her head as she studied him for a moment.

'You know better than to so easily let your opponent out of your line of sight,' Frostmask commented. *'That was one of the first techniques we practiced.'*

Lizardpaw avoided meeting her eyes. His tail twitched, and he didn't respond to her beyond a curt nod. Frostmask gestured at him to sit, and she did the same, waiting until he finally lifted his eyes from the ground to her.

'What's wrong?' she asked. *'You haven't been focused on training this whole time.'*

Lizardpaw was still for a few moments, his blue eyes staring into her own. Then his body moved quickly in a sudden question.

'Am I useless?'

Frostmask stiffened in shock, giving a hard blink.

'Of course not!' she responded, her facing screwing up with her vehemence.

Lizardpaw scuffled his paws, his expression unconvinced.

'Why would you think that? Has someone said something to you?' Frostmask demanded, her mind immediately flying to Dampfang.

Her claws curled out of her paws and sunk deeply into the muddy ground.

I swear, if Dampfang spoke to Lizardpaw that way, I'll flay him alive!

But, Lizardpaw shook his head *'no,'* and Frostmask relaxed, her claws sheathing again.

'No one's said anything,' Lizardpaw signed. *'It's just... a feeling that I have.'*

'But, why would you think that?' Frostmask insisted.

Lizardpaw looked away. His paws began to move in signs in response, but he kept his gaze off of Frostmask.

'Well it's why you make me do this special training right? And, why Sedgestar checks up on me.' Lizardpaw's face creased in a frown. *'He doesn't do that to Featherpaw and Yewpaw.'*

Frostmask chewed her lip for a moment as she tried to think of a delicate response. She didn't want to say the wrong thing and risk upsetting Lizardpaw more than he was already upset now. He glanced over at her again, waiting for her answer.

'It's true that your training has been a bit different in someways than the other apprentices' training,' she signed. *'But, it's been that way, so you're able to compensate for your lack of hearing. It's not because you're weak or useless.'*

'As for Sedgestar...' Frostmask hesitated.

She knew that Sedgestar checked in on Lizardpaw to privately assess him and make sure he was making good progress with his training. But, she was afraid that if she told Lizardpaw that, he would interpret it as Sedgestar not having faith in him.

'He cares about you and wants you to do well,' she signed. *'He is your kin after all.'*

'He's Yewpaw's and Featherpaw's kin too,' Lizardpaw responded, his chin jutting out mutinously. *'It's because he doesn't think I can do it, right?'*

Frostmask winced faintly.

Snake-dung! That thought was exactly what I was trying to avoid.

'That's not true,' Frostmask insisted.

Frostmask began another sign, but her paws faltered as Lizardpaw's tail lashed, and he jumped to his feet.

'I'm never going to be a real warrior, am I?' Lizardpaw demanded, his blue eyes blazing with pain. *'Why would Sedgestar ever bring me into a battle when he could take Yewpaw or Featherpaw instead? They're just as good at fighting as me* ***and*** *they can hear. So, he won't have to worry about them like they're a helpless kit!'*

Lizardpaw glared at her, his short white pelt prickling around him like it was crackling with electricity. Frostmask was motionless for a few heartbeats as she processed his outburst. But, then her paws began to move in slow signs.

'You know that I was born outside of ShadowClan, right?' she asked. *'Some cats think that I'll never be a loyal warrior because of it.'*

Her stomach clenched as an image of Sedgestar's cold amber eyes, glaring at her in his den formed in her mind.

Lizardpaw shook his head firmly.

'It's not the same,' he signed.

His bitter blue gaze flitted over her.

'There's nothing wrong with you,' he added.

Frostmask sighed softly.

'I know it's not the same,' she signed. *'But, some cats do think there's something wrong with me. Just on the inside instead of the outside.'*

Frostmask's whiskers twitched in rueful humor. Lizardpaw was still as he gazed at her, waiting for her to continue. Her dark humor evaporated as instead a heavy weight settled in Frostmask's gut. This conversation was swirling up all of her feelings about being a rejected outcast, which had burdened her throughout her life. And, they were made even sharper by the edge of betrayal that she'd felt since the reveal of the secret after the battle. The painful emotions pooled together and then froze into a terrible icicle, its sharp point piercing her heart.

'I know that I'll never understand what it's like to be deaf,' she signed. *'But, I do understand the feeling that you're different. That you don't belong. That no matter what you do, you'll never be enough.'*

Lizardpaw blinked hard and looked away from her. Frostmask felt a lump forming in the back of her throat as an echo of his emotion rushed through her. But, she shoved her own pain away as she rose to her paws and walked over to him, gently lying her tail over his

back. Lizardpaw's muscles were stiff, but he didn't move away from her comforting touch. Frostmask drew his gaze back to her with a brush of her paw against his shoulder.

'But, there is still strength in your difference,' Frostmask signed. *'You can do things that no other cats in the clan can! You can feel someone's vibrations through the ground as they walk. And, you can pick up even the faintest scent trails. In someways, you are the most useful cat in the clan.'*

'...And, in other ways, I'm the most useless,' he signed, but there was some dry humor in his expression. *'Like when it comes to listening to birdsongs.'*

Frostmask purred.

'Birdsongs are overrated,' she said with a dismissive tail-flick. *'They just wake you up in the morning, right after you've gotten to your nest after a long night-hunt.'*

Lizardpaw purred faintly, but there was a thoughtful look in his eyes, his tail twitching as he considered her words.

'What about you?' he asked after a hesitation. *'What strength do you have from being born outside of ShadowClan?'*

Frostmask swallowed uncertainly, her skin prickling.

I'm still trying to figure that out.

But, on the outside, she purred, giving his shoulder a gentle bump with her own.

'That's a secret,' she signed, arching her brows and giving an exaggerated waving of her tail.

Lizardpaw purred again, his gaze narrowing playfully. Frostmask's heart eased some as he returned to his bright-eyed self.

'But, I'm your apprentice! Don't I get to know?!' he asked.

'Only if you beat me this round,' Frostmask said, trotting back into the

more open part of the clearing and flicking her tail at him to follow. *'We still have more battle training to do.'*

Lizardpaw's focus had sharpened after their conversation, and Frostmask was pleased by how well he started holding his own against her. Now, they prowled around each other in their final match. Frostmask muscles were aching from their repeated tussling on the ground, but she rolled the soreness from her shoulders, getting ready.

Frostmask leapt at Lizardpaw, and he ducked beneath her, her paws just skimming the ends of his fur. Frostmask landed behind him, and he whirled around quickly to face her, not even allowing her to be out of his sight for a heartbeat. A jolt of pride warmed her chest.

Good!

Then Frostmask was dancing backwards as he moved into an attack. Lizardpaw's blue eyes darken with concentration as he aimed a series of unforgiving cuffs at her head with his forepaws.

Impressed with his speed, Frostmask dodged, managing to avoid most of his hits, although one made contact with the side of her muzzle, snapping her head to the side. Frostmask drove the sting of the hit away with a few swift blinks, but she still kept a careful eye on Lizardpaw, watching as his flurry of hits slowed, his stamina flagging as all the tiring training caught up to him. Sensing his weakness, Frostmask surged forward, breaking through his hurried, defensive swipes and tackling him.

The tackle was a risk because Lizardpaw was larger than her and theoretically could overpower her, but Frostmask didn't think he was yet trained enough to know how to use the full power of his strength. She could feel him struggling against her now, but his moves were unfocused, and he wasn't using the motion of their tumble to his advantage. Frostmask on the other paw, harnessed the power of their roll to make up for her lesser strength and size. She moved with it until she rolled back to the top, at which point, she slammed her weight back, jarring the two of them to a stop and shoving Lizardpaw to the earth, pinning him in place.

Panting, Frostmask stepped off of him.

'You did well. Especially with that hit,' she signed, reaching a paw up to touch her still slightly stinging muzzle.

Lizardpaw's eyes brightened, his tail curling up happily as he scrambled back to his feet.

'But, you need to learn how to move with the roll when you're tumbling on the ground,' she added.

Frostmask explained to him how to make his body limp, moving with flow of the motion until the exact right moment, when he should tense and stop, ending up pinning his opponent. They practiced it a few more times until she dismissed him from training for the night. The sun had set a little while ago, turning the clearing nearly pitch black, and Frostmask was tired of tripping over the Burnt Sycamore's roots.

As she walked to the edge of the clearing to lead them back to camp, she hesitated when she noticed Lizardpaw wasn't right behind her. She turned back to glance at him questioningly. He padded over to her, his brow furrowed and troubled like it had been earlier in the evening.

'Frostmask?' Lizardpaw asked, before hesitating, his paws shifting with uncharacteristic nervousness.

She tilted her head at him, gesturing at him to continue. He paused for a moment longer.

'What we were talking about earlier... Does that feeling,' he asked finally, *'that feeling that you don't belong... Now that you're a warrior, does it get better? Does it go away?'*

Frostmask blinked and touched her flank to his so he could feel the vibrations of the purr that she forced from her chest.

'Yes,' she lied.

She and Lizardpaw walked into a quiet camp. Cats were either still out on their evening patrols or in their nests sleeping, so besides

Greytail, Darkpelt and Larkfoot, who were sharing a meal and talking quietly near the elders' den, the camp's clearing was deserted.

'Get something to eat and get some rest,' Frostmask signed to Lizardpaw. *'We'll resume training at dawn.'*

Lizardpaw nodded, his bright pink tongue curling out in a sudden yawn. Frostmask purred and watched him pad off to the fresh-kill pile with a fond gaze. She knew he must be exhausted from all the battle training they did that evening.

Frostmask, however, didn't quite feel like going to her nest yet. The sun set quickly in leaf-bare, so although it was already fully dark out, energy still fueled her body. Her gaze flickered back over to Lizardpaw and the fresh-kill pile, focusing on the dwindling prey supply.

I could hunt for a while until I get tired. ShadowClan needs the food.

Frostmask's gaze flickered up to the night sky. The stars were clear and bright tonight since the moon was only a thin, curved claw. Frostmask's jaw clenched in sudden anxiety.

It was only a few nights away from the new moon, and she still hadn't figured out if she should meet Paledusk or not. The decision needled her like thorns in her pelt.

Honestly, she *was* curious to learn more about Paledusk's and May's past, but beyond her personal curiosity, a part of her also felt like she had an obligation to ShadowClan to go to the meeting— any chance she had to get information about SkyClan or RiverClan out of Paledusk, she should take, right? She had already told Sedgestar and Grovepelt about how RiverClan had wanted ShadowClan's herbs, which was something she had found out from Paledusk.

Frostmask frowned slightly to herself.

But, would it even be safe to meet with Paledusk? What if it was some kind of trap or ambush or attack?

Frostmask gave her head a small shake.

No. That doesn't make sense. If he wanted to hurt me, he'd have done it already— that night when I confronted him on SkyClan territory. I think he's genuine about wanting to speak to me.

But, still, to meet with Paledusk, she'd have to sneak away from camp, which came with the risk of getting caught. Obviously she couldn't get Sedgestar's permission for the meeting because that would mean confessing that she knew Paledusk was her father, and that she'd already seen him once on SkyClan territory. It would only make him more suspicious of her and cause him to further doubt her loyalty.

Her stomach twisted sickeningly. The emotion was even fresher and stronger than usual because of her conversation with Lizardpaw.

She heaved a sigh, her eyes still on the moon. Frostmask couldn't help but feeling like the large, pearly claw was looming over her head, about to come slashing down at any moment in her execution.

"You alright?"

Frostmask blinked, jerked out of her thoughts by the familiar mew. She pulled her gaze off of the moon to see Autumnleap padding over to her. He had just emerged from the warriors' den, judging by the way his fur stuck up in sections, still ruffled from sleep.

She shrugged.

"Yeah. I guess," she meowed. "Just thinking about things."

He yawned widely before half-heartedly reaching a paw up to try to flatten some of his long fur on his shoulder. His ruffled appearance sent a rush of unexpected warmth through her chest, chasing away the chill brought on by her thoughts about Paledusk, Sedgestar, and his betrayal... Just something about his scruffy pelt was strangely endearing.

"Wanna talk about it?" he asked, his jaws twitching as he tried fending back another yawn.

He was unsuccessful and his body was wracked by it, his teeth

flashing in the low light.

"I'm alright," she said, her whiskers twitching in faint amusement. "Maybe you should just get back to your nest; you look like you're asleep on your paws. Why'd you come out here anyway?"

Autumnleap squinted thoughtfully as if he wasn't quite sure why he had either.

"Thirsty," he said finally. "I wanted a drink. Then when I was having some water, I saw you looking like you were having a fierce argument with the moon. So, I decided to check on you too."

Frostmask purred lightly.

"Well I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine," she said.

Even though Autumnleap's gaze was still half-lidded with sleep, she saw his eyes flick over her skeptically. She shot a quick glance up to the sky before glancing over at Autumnleap again.

"Although I'm a little bit mad the moon won the fight," she joked, rumbling a brief purr.

Frostmask's heart warmed as she was rewarded with his laugh in response.

Still purring, Autumnleap took a seat next to her, twisting to groom his side and trying to flatten his fur with a bit more vigor this time.

"I was thinking of going for a hunt," Frostmask continued. "I don't feel like heading to my nest yet."

"I'll come with you," Autumnleap said immediately, lifting his head and glancing over at her as sleep was chased from his amber gaze.

Frostmask tilted her head to the side.

"I'd enjoy the company, but I don't want to keep you from your nest," she said.

Autumnleap got to his paws and stretched, yawning for a final time.

Then he straightened and gave his pelt a brisk shake.

"But, someone's gotta keep the moon in line!" he purred, his tail twitching playfully. "If it starts another fight, I'll beat it up for you."

Frostmask shook her head with an exasperated purr. But, then she got to her paws without another word and began to walk towards the thorn tunnel, Autumnleap right behind her.

Frostmask and Autumnleap twined their way through the dark forest. They had managed to snag two mice, but the scarcity of prey sent them scouring across the territory, and they found themselves close to the ThunderClan border, still without anything else to show for it. During their unsuccessful hunt, a deep feeling of melancholy had taken roost in Frostmask's chest, making her quiet and pensive. She sent a long glance across to the still thunderpath and into the territory beyond.

"I'm sure we'll be over there again soon, battling SkyClan," she murmured, her gaze searching the ThunderClan forest.

"Are you nervous about the next battle?" Autumnleap asked, coming to stand at her shoulder.

Frostmask stiffened suddenly, panic stabbing at her.

Why would he ask that?! Did he find out my father's in SkyClan?

"No. Of course not," Frostmask responded sharply, drawing away from him. "I'd always fight to defend ShadowClan!"

Autumnleap blinked at her in surprise.

"I know that!" he protested. "All I meant was since you got pretty badly hurt last time. I was just wondering if you were worried..."

He gestured towards where she was still missing fur from the bite wound she'd received on her neck. Frostmask made herself relax, and she gave her head a small, sharp shake, her fur hot with embarrassment.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I shouldn't've been so defensive..."

"You know that I know you're loyal," he meowed, peering at her in concern.

Frostmask sighed, digging her claws slightly into the ground. Powerful emotions sloshed in her belly, making her feel unsteady on her paws. She was torn between guilt about not telling Autumnleap the truth about Paledusk, and terror that if she did, she'd lose him.

Not only is Paledusk SkyClan's deputy, he's also the cat that almost killed Autumnleap. An insidious thought whispered. *What would he think of me if he knew the truth? Maybe he'd be disgusted by me. Maybe he'd hate me.*

Frostmask winced faintly to herself.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, forcing a purr. "I feel like lately, you've just been being nice, and in response, I've just been clawing your whiskers off."

Autumnleap purred quietly, but he was still looking at her with worry.

"It's alright," he said. "I know you've been going through a rough time lately."

Frostmask sighed again.

That's an understatement.

Autumnleap stared at her for a few moments longer.

"...Anything that you want to talk about?" he asked, breaking the silence between them.

"Not right now," Frostmask said, scuffling her paws on the ground. "Right now I just want to forget about all that stuff."

Autumnleap's amber eyes brightened.

"I can help with that too," he said, flicking his tail against her side playfully and trotting away from the thunderpath. "Come with me."

"Where are we going? What are we doing?" Frostmask asked.

Her voice was uncertain, but her paws weren't as she followed him back deeper into their territory.

"We're going to have fun of course," he said, arching a brow at her as he glanced over his shoulder. "You asked for a distraction: you're going to get one."

Frostmask's whiskers twitched, partly in amusement and partly in confusion.

"How long will this take?" she asked. "We're supposed to be hunting, and I have training with Lizardpaw at dawn—"

Autumnleap gently flicked his tail across her muzzle, silencing her. Frostmask glared at him, and he twitched his tail away, leaving her to swipe auburn hairs from her mouth with her paw.

"Hey!" she protested.

"I'm sorry," Autumnleap meowed, gazing at her solemnly. "But, I think the Clan will survive if we don't complete our hunt. This is an unsanctioned patrol, after all. And, besides, the first rule of having fun is that you don't think about your future responsibilities. That's for tomorrow-Frostmask to worry about. Not current-Frostmask."

Frostmask arched a brow at him.

"There's rules about having fun?!" she asked indignantly. "I thought part of what makes things fun is that there aren't any rules!"

"The second rule of having fun is that you don't question the rules," Autumnleap said with a purr.

His mockingly serious facade had crumbled, and now his amber gaze shimmered in clear amusement. Frostmask rolled her eyes but purred in response, deciding to just go along with it.

"Alright," she said. "Then what's the third rule, wise-one?"

He twitched his tail mischievously.

"You have to catch me," he said, suddenly sprinting off into the forest.

Frostmask let out an indignant huff at his lack of warning, but she sprung forward after him. Her still-sore muscles from training with Lizardpaw complained as she followed his dark shadow, but she pressed through the ache.

Panting, Frostmask closed the distance between them in a few more strides, a sudden surge of playful energy in her chest giving her the speed to catch up. Letting out a victorious yowl, she pounced in a clumsy tackle. The two of them went tumbling across the cold ground, rolling through a patch of snow. When they finally came to a stop, Frostmask stumbled back to her paws with a shiver.

"It's too cold to be rolling around on the ground!" she gasped, shaking the dampness from her pelt.

She prodded Autumnleap's side with her paw as he got back to his paws, purring.

"Besides, what sort of rule is 'you have to catch me?'" she said, narrowing her eyes teasingly. "I'm starting to think you're making these all up on the spot."

Autumnleap scoffed offendedly.

"Would you please refer back to rule number two: 'do not question the rules,'" he said in his best pompous voice, sticking his muzzle up in the air.

But, then he squeaked in a very undignified way when Frostmask sent a pawful of snow flying into his face. Frostmask tried to stifle her loud purrs of amusement at the look of shock in Autumnleap's gaze as his quickly rubbed the snow from his muzzle, blinking his eyes hard. As his surprise faded, his eyes narrowed in playful outrage.

"Oh *now* you've asked for it," Autumnleap growled in a mock threat, crouching down.

Paws sliding on the slick ground, Frostmask tried to scramble away

from him, but Autumnleap lunged forward with surprising speed. He grabbed her with his paws and they tumbled, white powder kicking up behind them again.

They hadn't play-fought like this in moons, and Frostmask was caught off guard by Autumnleap's strength. He easily muscled her into the snow, although she noticed his movements were all carefully measured as to not hurt her. Autumnleap pinned her on her back, his gaze glinting deviously as he shifted his weight onto three paws, keeping her in place but freeing one paw to scoop snow onto her. Frostmask squeaked in protest then gasped as the cold from the snow he piled on her wormed its way through her belly fur.

"I win!" Autumnleap declared, his tail waving in victory.

He held up another pawful of snow, hovering it over her face threateningly.

"Surrender, and I'll be merciful!" he growled.

"Never!" Frostmask spat with mock fury, pressing her fore-paws against his white-furred chest.

As Autumnleap went to dump the snow on her, Frostmask buckled, wiggling away from him. She managed to flip over and avoid the snow to her face, but before she could properly get back to her paws, Autumnleap pounced on her, grabbing her scruff in his jaws to keep her from escaping.

Struck with a sudden idea, Frostmask yelped as if he'd hurt her with the nip, and she felt him immediately release her.

"Are you oka—"

Frostmask whipped around towards him, purring and pawing up snow towards his face before he could finish his sentence.

"Hey!" Autumnleap gasped, recoiling and swiping the snow out of his eyes again. "That was a dirty trick! I thought I hurt you."

"'Dirty?'" Frostmask echoed, her gaze shimmering mischievously.

"Instead of insulting me, shouldn't you be praising me for using my opponent's weakness against him?"

Autumnleap narrowed his eyes and pounced at her without replying, but she jumped away before he could catch her this time. Then she flashed forward again, raining feather-soft swats against his now very damp face with her fore-paws. Autumnleap rumbled a playful growl, snapping at her paws, but seemed to be missing them deliberately.

Frostmask drew away from him, and the two began to circle each other warily, waiting for the other to strike.

"We were apprentices the last time we wrestled like this," Frostmask said, wistfulness creeping into her voice as she was reminded of the simpler time.

"At least now we no longer have Beeclaw and Swoopstrike growling at us to 'be serious' and 'pay attention,'" Autumnleap said, putting on a deeper voice to mimic their old mentors.

Frostmask purred, a bittersweet swirl of grief and fondness settling over her as she thought of Swoopstrike.

"I don't recall Beeclaw doing much growling," she said.

"Well Swoopstrike did enough growling for the both of them," Autumnleap said with a purr.

But, he stilled, stopping their play-fighting so he could gaze at her. The concern was obvious in his eyes as he tried to judge if talking about Swoopstrike was too painful for her to handle. Frostmask sighed softly and sat down on the cold snow, wrapping her tail tightly around her paws as the chill from her wet pelt finally caught up to her again.

"Poolcloud's worried about Fogfur," Frostmask murmured. "He's really sick."

"I know," Autumnleap said, his gaze sympathetic.

She stared down at her paws.

"So much has changed since we were apprentices," she said, unable to hide the pain in her voice.

Autumnleap padded over to her, sitting by her side.

"...At least we still have each other," he meowed gently.

She glanced back over at him.

"And, Poolcloud and Pineshade," Autumnleap added as if an afterthought.

Frostmask huffed, giving her head a small shake.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Well, when you mentioned Pineshade, it reminded me how we didn't have the best relationship as apprentices," she said drily. "Maybe I'm looking back at the past too fondly."

She stared out into the dark forest.

"It all just feels so long ago now," Frostmask said, and Autumnleap murmured an agreement.

Frostmask sighed softly, losing herself in her thoughts and her memories. Sometimes she felt like an entirely different cat than she was as a young apprentice.

In some ways it was good: when she had just started her apprenticeship, could she have ever imagined being able to stand up to Dampfang like she could now? But, in others...

Frostmask unsheathed her claws, digging them into the snow under her.

Half SkyClan.

She stared down at her paws, her shoulders tensing.

I never would've guessed that as an apprentice.

Frostmask clenched her jaw.

How did she, a daughter of a SkyClan cat and a rogue, end up in ShadowClan of all places? And, why couldn't her Clan be as loyal and devoted to her as she was to it? It wasn't like she could control her blood. Or the fact that May had brought her here, and Sedgestar had allowed her to stay. All she could control was who she was today... and she was a ShadowClan cat.

Her claws glinted faintly in the low light, calling her attention to them and away from her thoughts. She lifted one paw up off the ground to study them. For the first time, she noticed how long and curved her claws were— much longer than the claws that she'd seen on her clan-mates.

A fragment of a memory flashed in her mind.

Long, curved claws just like her own, stained red with blood as they raked down Autumnleap's belly.

Her gaze flickered over to Autumnleap's underside, and she caught a glimpse of the scar Paledusk left there.

Her pelt prickling with horror, Frostmask shuddered, quickly putting her claws away.

"What's wrong?" Autumnleap asked, making her jump again.

"Nothing," she said, too quickly.

Autumnleap gazed at her, his eyes narrowing slightly. Frostmask's stomach clenched.

"I was just thinking about why we're here," Frostmask meowed, hoping to distract him.

He cocked his head to the side, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"What to you mean? Here in the woods? We were hunting," he said.

"No. Not that," Frostmask said, giving her head a small shake. "Like, why are we in ShadowClan? Why were you born here and not somewhere else; why did my mom choose to take me here... Things like that. Do you ever think about those things?"

Autumnleap was silent for several heartbeats.

"...No," he finally admitted.

He shot her a sheepish look.

"Do you think I'm stupid for not?" he asked.

"No!" Frostmask said, gently bumping his shoulder with hers. "Of course not. If anything, it's stupid for *me* to think about. Wondering about it doesn't help or change anything, right?"

Autumnleap nodded, his mouth opening like he was about to say something, but then he sneezed suddenly instead. Frostmask shot him a sharp look as he pawed at his muzzle.

"I just got some snow in my nose," he reassured, seeing her expression. "I don't feel like I'm getting sick."

Frostmask nodded, her concern fading slightly.

"Even so, we should probably fetch our prey and get back to camp," she meowed. "Or, we'll both catch a chill with our wet pelts."

Autumnleap nodded. As they both stood, Frostmask flicked a clump of snow off of his shoulder with a sweep of her tail, and Autumnleap purred a thanks. Then his eyes met hers, and Frostmask froze, suddenly finding herself trapped beneath his gaze.

The warmth in his eyes was almost enough to chase the cold from her pelt. Frostmask swallowed hard as her heartbeat picked up like the drumming feet of a rabbit. She finally broke the connection of their gazes, glancing down at her paws, but her racing heart didn't slow.

"You know," she mumbled. "I think I'll never know why exactly I ended up in ShadowClan, but I'm really glad I did... so I was able to meet you."

Exchanges

What am I doing.

The thought reverberated in Frostmask's head in time with her pawsteps as she trotted through the forest. It was so pitch black out, she had trouble not tripping over roots as she navigated around the pines. As if being a moonless night wasn't enough, the sky was also overcast, so the clouds blotted out even the little light the stars would've provided.

A bad omen? Frostmask fretted, casting a quick glance upwards.

She didn't have enough knowledge of StarClan to know for sure, but it seemed ominous nevertheless.

Maybe I am totally frog-brained.

Still, it felt too late to turn back now; she was already approaching the thunderpath. Leaving camp had been simple enough. She'd just made sure Autumnleap was soundly sleeping, so he wouldn't invite himself to come along into the forest with her, and walked past Murmurstep, the camp guard, with a friendly nod. Frostmask supposed in that way, she was lucky to be in ShadowClan— no one would think of questioning a cat who wanted to leave camp alone at night. Once she headed into the woods, she'd disguised her scent and headed straight in the direction of Fourtrees. Hopefully she'd be able to catch some prey on her way back to explain her absence, but if she didn't have the time, she could just say that the hunting was poor.

Frostmask hesitated at the edge of the thunderpath, casting a nervous glance from side to side. She couldn't see any monsters prowling around, but her heart still hammered with apprehension. She'd never crossed the thunderpath alone before. She had debated taking the tunnel instead, but Sedgestar still had the Clan keeping a careful watch on it, now that they knew SkyClan was aware of it... If she took the tunnel tonight, she might leave some sort of trace on

it that her clan-mates would find, and she wasn't taking any risks.

Frostmask took a deep breath then plunged forward, her paws flying across the flat black stone. She shot into the bushes on the other side, coming to a stumbling, panting stop. No monsters had appeared, but her muscles were still trembling.

She waited by the thunderpath's edge until she was able to compose herself. The last thing she wanted was Paledusk seeing her frightened and disheveled. Frostmask twisted her head to rasp her tongue down her side to smooth her ruffled pelt.

I can't let Paledusk see any weaknesses. About myself or about ShadowClan. She reminded herself. *I'm here to gather information about him, SkyClan, and May. But, I can't forget he's the enemy. He killed Swoopstrike and attacked Autumnleap.*

Frostmask's claws slid out and a soft growl rumbled in her throat at the thought. She forced her claws away and gave her head a small shake.

But, I shouldn't be overtly aggressive. Or, else he might not tell me anything...

Once Frostmask was confident that she was calm, she began to prowl forward, towards the Fourtrees' hollow. She approached silently, crouching at the top of the hill and scanning the clearing below. Even in the near-total darkness, she could make out the lone white figure sitting near the base of the Great Rock. Frostmask's stomach clenched as her gaze settled on him. A part of her couldn't believe that Paledusk actually came.

*A part of me can't believe that **I** actually came here either.*

Frostmask slipped down the side of the hill, silently entering in the undergrowth that surrounded the clearing. She began to circle Fourtrees, every sense straining to make sure Paledusk was actually alone. But, as she crept through the bushes, she could detect no hint of any other cat. Once she made a full circuit around the hollow, Frostmask hesitated, gazing out at Paledusk in the clearing. He hadn't seemed to have noticed her yet; he seemed too busy gazing

up at the top of the Great Rock as if he was raptly watching an invisible leader deliver their announcements. Frostmask studied him closely. He looked as he usually did— his white pelt immaculately groomed, smooth and unblemished besides the two scars on his face. There was the old crescent moon one on his cheek, and the new one slashing diagonally across his forehead and near his eye. Swoopstrike's scar. What had once been red and raw had already faded in the past few moons to just a thin furrow in Paledusk's fur.

This is my last chance to go back. Frostmask reminded herself.

But, her paws were already creeping forward into the clearing. Paledusk's ears didn't even twitch in her direction as she crept up on him, coming to a stop a mere fox-length away.

"Hello," Frostmask murmured.

Paledusk jerked, his green eyes going wide as he glanced over at her. But, the shock in his gaze quickly faded as he rumbled a brief purr.

"Frostmask! I didn't even notice you approach," he said, dipping his head to her. "But, I'm glad to see you decided to come."

Frostmask just nodded at him, her pelt prickling uncomfortably. Paledusk however, didn't seem to share any of her discomfort. His body was relaxed as he blinked at her.

"How are you doing?" he meowed. "I hope this cold hasn't chased away all of ShadowClan's prey."

Paledusk flexed his claws.

"The squirrels in our territory have taken to their nests, and it feels like all of the birds have migrated south for the winter," he said with a rueful purr.

Guilt flashed in Frostmask's chest. Prey in ShadowClan was hard to find. Why was she wasting time talking to this SkyClan cat when she could be hunting for her Clan?

Frostmask gave her head an almost imperceptible shake as she did her best to push the feeling away, not wanting Paledusk to read it on her face.

"Prey is still running despite typical leaf-bare difficulties," she said vaguely.

She'd knew she'd rather pull out her own whiskers than admit to Paledusk that ShadowClan was having trouble finding enough food.

Paledusk nodded.

"Of course," he meowed, before pausing for a moment. "...Well do you have an answer for me?"

Frostmask's ears pricked.

"An answer?" she echoed.

"To my proposal at the gathering. That we should be friends," he said, blinking at her.

Frostmask's pelt bristled warily.

"I don't know about 'friends,'" she said slowly. "'Friends' implies that I trust you... and that I like you."

Paledusk gave a bitter chuckle.

"Alright," he conceded. "You're right that trust and affection needs to be earned. Maybe 'friends' is too strong of a word then, for the moment. Allies, perhaps?"

Frostmask's tail twitched with indecision. Paledusk reclined back slightly.

"At the very least, are you open to getting to know each other?" he asked. "So we can at least see if those things are possibilities?"

"Yes," Frostmask said with a nod.

Paledusk purred.

"I'm glad to hear that. So, tell me about your life in ShadowClan," Paledusk said, his eyes bright with interest. "I remember seeing you with some apprentices last gathering. Are one of them yours?"

"Yes," Frostmask muttered again. "Lizardpaw."

Paledusk nodded.

"You haven't been a warrior long; it's a honor to be given an apprentice so early. Sedgestar must think highly of you," he said.

Frostmask shifted her paws and didn't respond beyond a nod. Another thing she definitely didn't want to tell Paledusk about was Sedgestar's betrayal.

"What other cats do you spend time with?" Paledusk asked curiously.

"Autumnleap is my best friend," Frostmask murmured.

Paledusk tilted his head to the side like he was trying to place the name.

"Autumnleap..." he repeated thoughtfully.

"He's a dark ginger cat with a white belly," she meowed as her eyes narrowed, a brief growl rumbling in her throat. "You've met him before."

Paledusk gazed out into the forest, still lost in his thoughts. It took a moment before realization sparked in his eyes.

Their gazes met. Paledusk's expression was calm.

"He was at the battle in SkyClan's camp, wasn't he?" Paledusk meowed.

"Yes," Frostmask said, her voice dangerously soft. "You almost killed him."

Paledusk blinked.

"Then you were there too," he said.

She nodded tensely.

"I saw you attack him," she growled. "And, I saw Swoopstrike stop you."

Her jaw clenched in pain.

"Swoopstrike was my mentor. And, you killed him," she rasped, unsheathing her claws to sink them into the ground.

Her tail began to lash, and the growl rumbled louder in her throat.

There was a part of her mind that said that she was getting too worked up. That this wasn't the plan. That she was supposed to stay calm. But, those thoughts were mere whispers, lost in the roar of her blood pounding in her ears.

Paledusk stared at her, as unmoving as if he was carved from stone.

"I'm sorry," he meowed. "I didn't know."

"'Sorry?!'" Frostmask echoed incredulously, letting out a strangled bark of humorless laughter. "You killed Swoopstrike and tried to kill Autumnleap, and all you can say is you're sorry?!"

Paledusk's gaze darkened slightly.

"I was defending my home," he said, a quiet growl creeping into his voice. "You just experienced a similar attack, surely you understand the feeling of desperation that sort of invasion causes. Drastic actions must sometimes be taken."

Frostmask snarled in response.

"You could've just badly injured him!" she growled. "You didn't *have* to kill him!"

"I know," Paledusk said in a low voice.

Frostmask's stomach clenched. Somehow that admission was worse

than any sort of pathetic-excused denial. She arched her back, her fangs bared.

"Then why did you do it?" she demanded hoarsely.

Paledusk's green gaze was steady as he stared at her.

"Because in that moment, I was filled with a terrible pain and anger," he said. "I was enraged that my clan-mates were in danger, that SkyClan was under siege by two Clans. I was filled with a sense of injustice, and I wanted to make someone pay for it... I presume it's the same reason that you came to SkyClan territory to kill me."

Frostmask jerked, suddenly snapped out of her righteous rage and put off balance. She took a step back from Paledusk as icy dread ran down her spine.

"What?" she croaked, her ears flattening. "What are you talking—"

Paledusk shook his head, cutting her off.

"You don't have to lie to me, Frostmask," he meowed. "I'm not angry. You were hurting. I understand."

"But, I didn't—" Frostmask protested.

"But, you did," Paledusk said, tilting his head.

His expression was both partly amused by Frostmask's denial, but also seemingly confused by it.

"Why else would you've confronted me then?" he said. "I was in a remote area of the territory and alone. If you just wanted to talk to me, you could've done that at a gathering, which would've been a much less risky prospect for you. The other clue: I didn't hear you until you were in the trees right behind me. It's strange that I heard you then, when tonight you snuck up on me so easily. You must have let me hear you on purpose, but only after you'd already reached me... Why? The only explanation I can think of is that you stalked me silently at first, with an intent to harm me, but had a sudden change of heart."

Frostmask blinked, caught somewhere between horror and respect for his sharp observations.

"...*If* that's all true," Frostmask meowed, grateful that her voice came out steady despite the fact her head was spinning. "Then why aren't you afraid I'm going to hurt you now?"

"Excellent question," Paledusk said with a small purr. "Because that night, your emotions towards me were at their most intense. You had the location and the motive for a perfect kill-shot, and you didn't take it."

Frostmask clenched her jaw, realizing she just had a similar thought about Paledusk a few days ago, when she was worrying about if it was safe to meet him.

Her stomach flipped.

Frostmask gazed at Paledusk, silence falling between them. It was like she was somehow staring at a stranger and at her shadow at the same time. Uncannily familiar. She knew neither of them knew what this tentative bond between them would bring, but it seemed they were both willing to acknowledge one thing— they had missed their kill-shots.

"You have every right to still be angry with me for taking away someone close to you," Paledusk said, finally breaking the silence. "Just know that my actions didn't have malicious intent towards you. It was not meant to hurt you."

"That doesn't make the hurt any less," Frostmask growled, her fur still prickling.

"I know," Paledusk said with a nod. "I just ask that you keep an open mind going forward and try not to think the worst of me."

A hint of humor flashed in his eyes, making a crack in his serious demeanor.

"And, in return, I will do the same for you. Instead of spending each night with one eye open as I sleep," he said.

His tone was light and teasing, but Frostmask still felt shame prick at her paws. Did she really have any right to hold a massive grudge against Paledusk when she was the one that crept onto his territory with the intention to murder him in cold-blood? At least Paledusk had struck Swoopstrike and Autumnleap down nobly in the heat of battle...

"It's a shame we don't live in a more peaceful era," Paledusk continued after a beat of silence. "It would've made things easier for us."

"Is there such thing as a peaceful era?" Frostmask asked. "It seems like to me that SkyClan and ThunderClan are always fighting."

Paledusk stiffened slightly, and Frostmask felt her muscles tense in response. Maybe she had overstepped. She wasn't used to the delicate politics dealing with cats of other Clans required. But, then Paledusk flicked his tail and relaxed, letting out a quiet chuckle.

"You wouldn't be wrong," he meowed.

"Why is that?" Frostmask asked, emboldened by his response.

Paledusk settled down into a more comfortable crouch.

"It's a long story," he said. "ThunderClan and SkyClan have always had a rivalry. Some say it even goes back to the original leaders—Skystar and Thunderstar. They were kin you know; father and son."

Frostmask's eyes widened in surprise.

"A father and son ended up in separate clans? And, became their leaders?" she asked.

Paledusk nodded with a wry twitch of his whiskers.

"See, the situation you and I are in isn't actually that strange or uncommon," he meowed, arching a brow at her. "Although Thunderstar and Skystar hardly saw eye-to-eye."

A dry purr of amusement rumbled deep in his throat as if he was laughing at his own private joke. Frostmask blinked, wondering if

he was laughing at something he knew about Skystar and Thunderstar that she didn't, or if he was still thinking about her and his relationship.

"Anyway, the particular feud which plagues SkyClan and ThunderClan today is much more recent than Skystar and Thunderstar. Some seasons ago, the leader of SkyClan before Fennelstar was a cat named Darkstar," Paledusk continued. "Darkstar was a formidable warrior when he was younger leader, but as he aged and came towards the end of his nine lives... he began to lose his senses."

Paledusk's gaze darkened slightly, as if those words struck deeper than he was letting on.

Maybe he's thinking about Birdstrike...

"At one gathering near the end of his ninth life, Darkstar decided to give away a chunk of SkyClan territory to ThunderClan. At the time, it would've been about one fourth of our total land..."

Frostmask inhaled sharply, her ears jutting up in shock.

One fourth?! That'd be like if Sedgestar decided to give WindClan all of our territory between the marsh and the edge of the moor!

Paledusk nodded grimly, his tail lashing behind him as anger smoldered in his eyes.

"So you see, the reason we're at war with ThunderClan is because we are just trying to right a wrong of the past. SkyClan has already suffered for seasons because of the foolishness of one leader. Should we be doomed to suffer for generations more?" he said, a growl drifting into his voice.

Frostmask's ears flattened against her head as doubt nipped at her.

Is this really the truth? Or just something Paledusk and SkyClan made up to bolster their claim?

"No one in ThunderClan has ever mentioned that story to me," she muttered, but she didn't dare voice all her doubts.

Scoffing, Paledusk tossed his head.

"Why would they?" he asked, his gaze sharp. "Do you know why Darkstar made his decision? ThunderClan had just had several litters of kits born, and they claimed they needed more hunting grounds to feed them. Darkstar said that the clans should help each other out in their times of need, so he gave away our land."

Paledusk's gaze narrowed, his tail lashing even more violently as he stared out into the trees in the direction of ThunderClan territory.

"But, will ThunderClan repay the favor? Of course not. Now when SkyClan needs the territory back, Morningstar and ThunderClan turn a blind-eye to our troubles and act like they're the victims. They're a Clan of fox-hearted hypocrites," he spat.

Frostmask was quiet, watching Paledusk warily. After a long, tense moment, Paledusk's fur flattened as he tried to compose himself. He glanced back over at Frostmask with a more measured gaze.

"But, I understand if you don't trust the story," he said, giving a bitter twitch of his tail. "I'm from an enemy clan, after all. Still, I promise every word is the truth. Ask your elders about Darkstar. They will tell you the same thing I have. It happened before I was born, but from what I've heard, it was quite the memorial gathering. I'm sure that they haven't forgotten."

Frostmask cocked her head to the side.

"And, how does RiverClan tie into all this?" she asked. "Do they also have a bone to pick with ThunderClan? You didn't seem too fond of them last time we talked. I believe the term you used was 'slimy eel-hearts.'"

Paledusk chuckled and relaxed back, at ease again after his outburst about ThunderClan faded.

"There's no feud that I know of there," he meowed. "But, the one thing you need to understand about Willowstar is that she's as opportunistic as a fox. You might think that she's not aggressive. That she likes to keep RiverClan to themselves. But, at the first

scent of blood in the air—"

Paledusk slammed one of his big paws against the ground, making Frostmask jump at the loud *thump*.

"—she's on it like that," he continued. "If it suits RiverClan, that is. That's how RiverClan ended up entwined here with the rest of us."

He dipped his head to Frostmask briefly and continued in a softer voice.

"Although I'm sorry ShadowClan has gotten tangled up in this mess too. Unfortunately, in Fennelstar's eyes, you've allied yourselves with our enemy." Paledusk's green eyes brightened, gleaming in the low light. "Although alliances can always shift..."

The fur on the back of her neck stiffened. Frostmask glanced away from him, breaking eye contact as she pretended not to hear the insinuation in his words.

I'm here to gather information and to learn about my mother. I have no authority to make new alliances and Paledusk has no right to ask me to do so... No matter how legitimate SkyClan's claim is or not.

"It must be difficult for ThunderClan to give away the territory they've used for seasons though," she pointed out mildly, trying to steer the conversation away from ShadowClan. "Several generations now have grown up thinking it's theirs."

Paledusk shook his head derisively.

"That way of thinking is exactly the problem with Clan cats," he said. "They are so traditionalist. Stuck in their ways."

He gave a soft growl.

"It's the thing that's always frustrated me about the Clan way of life. They are so unwilling to accept change. To think outside their narrow framework. So quick to distrust or dislike any cat even a tiny bit different than themselves."

Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise and interest. She'd never

would've guessed that the stern SkyClan deputy had such relatively radical ideals.

Well I guess he did take a mate outside of his Clan... So, maybe I shouldn't be too surprised that he's not afraid to challenge the code.

Paledusk glanced at her, noting her expression of interest, and he continued.

"SkyClan is the only clan who's territory borders the two-leg place," he said. "So that means we have the most contact with cats who live outside of the Clans."

His bright green eyes lost focus for a moment; their intensity dimming as he drifted into a memory.

"That's how I met May," he murmured.

He blinked, and his gaze sharpened again.

"You think that having this contact with other cats might make SkyClan more tolerate to outsiders, but the opposite it true. Instead, they hate them more intensely because they view them as bigger threats. Rogues lurking at the border, greedy to snatch up our land."

He shook his head.

"But, they give no thought to the fact that these cats could help us. They could be potential allies or clan-mates even. Bolstering the clan instead of tearing it down."

Frostmask's brow furrowed. Since ShadowClan had never had problems with rogues in her life-time, she'd never thought much about cats outside of the clans as being threats or allies, beyond her own predicament as a daughter of a rogue of course. But, it was clearly something Paledusk had contemplated for a long time, and she could see the wisdom in his words.

"...Is that what you wanted with May?" she asked hesitantly. "For SkyClan to accept your relationship?"

"Of course," Paledusk said, glancing over at her. "But, SkyClan is too

blinded with prejudice. They wouldn't change their mind, and I had to choose between them and her."

Frostmask dipped her head, a weird feeling of disappointment tugging at her belly.

I guess a part of me hoped not all Clans were like ShadowClan towards outsiders.

"What about ShadowClan?" Paledusk asked, seemingly echoing her thoughts. "How did they react when they found out I'm your father?"

"They... don't know," Frostmask murmured. "A pawful of cats know my father was a SkyClan tom. But, only I know it's you."

"You haven't told anyone?" Paledusk asked in a soft, sympathetic voice.

Frostmask glanced at him sharply.

"Have you told anyone about me?" she shot back.

Paledusk hesitated a moment.

"No," he meowed finally. "I'm worried about how my clan-mates would react."

Frostmask sighed and stared down at her paws.

"Me too," she murmured. "I think it'll just make them distrust me more."

"This is what I mean about the Clans!" Paledusk said. "You joined ShadowClan so young; you're practically ShadowClan born. And, yet they still whisper doubts about your heritage. Such senseless bigotry."

He scoffed, shaking his head.

"They waste your potential and leave you on shaky footing, worried that if you take one misstep they'd be at your throat like the fox-

hearts they are," he growled.

Frostmask dug her claws into the ground as Paledusk's words triggered a rush of anxiety— the memory of Sedgestar snarling accusations at her in his den flashing in her mind. But, in combination with the anxiety, Frostmask felt an odd sense of relief.

Somehow, *Paledusk,* of all cats, seemed to understand her position in a way that none of her clan-mates had before. How could that be? Maybe his distance from ShadowClan gave him a clarity that her clan-mates did not have? Or did he just have more empathy for her situation because he had been mates with a cat outside of the Clans, so understood what it must feel like for her?

Frostmask blinked as another realization struck her.

Maybe it was good that Paledusk, a SkyClan cat, was the one that understood her situation best. She could talk openly with him about her problems without having to worry that he would think she was disloyal to ShadowClan... because he wasn't even *in* ShadowClan. She also didn't have to worry about him telling her concerns to any cat, ShadowClan, SkyClan, or otherwise, because in doing so he'd have to admit to meeting her and that she was his daughter, both things that she knew he did not want to do.

"...All my life I've tried my hardest to show them that I'm a loyal ShadowClan warrior," Frostmask said with a quiet growl. "But, it was never good enough for them."

Paledusk gazed at her sympathetically.

"You can't prove yourself to them because their fear of you isn't *rational,"* he said. "You cannot fight irrationality with logic."

Frostmask dug her claws into the ground.

"So I just have to accept that this is how it is?" she said, clenching her teeth. "That I have to live this way forever?"

Paledusk flicked his tail towards her. He hesitated a moment before laying it against her shoulder in the faintest feather-touch. Frostmask tensed but didn't move away.

"That's a part of the tragedy," he said. "The clans are so stuck in their ways that forcing them make the tiniest bit of change takes as much effort as moving a mountain."

He pulled his tail away, curling it back around his paws as he gazed out at the dark forest. Frostmask was silent for a few moments, contemplating his words.

"...Then I do just have to accept it," she said in a low voice. "No matter how terrible or ridiculous."

"You remind me of my brother," Paledusk said suddenly, making Frostmask's ears prick in surprise.

"Slatewhisker?" she asked.

Now it was Paledusk's ears which pricked in shock.

"How do you know his name?" he asked, glancing down at her.

Frostmask shrugged, her fur heating under the sharpness of his eyes. She didn't want to tell him about her little investigation about him and May before she pieced together the full truth. After all, she still didn't *really* trust Paledusk. These philosophical musing with him seemed harmless enough, but she'd seen the intensity of his anger, and she wasn't sure if he would like knowing that she had been sniffing around.

"I've heard rumors about him before," Frostmask said, semi-truthfully. "Some cats say that he ran off into the two-leg place to become a kitty-pet."

"Lies," Paledusk hissed, digging his claws into the ground for a moment as the fur on his shoulders prickled.

After a heartbeat though, he forced his pelt flat again.

"Sorry," he said in a more even tone, although his voice was still tight with anger. "Slatewhisker and I were very close, and it enrages me to hear cats sullying his legacy with these rumors. Believing that my brother would give up his freedom to live with *two-legs."*

Paledusk shook his head in disgust. Frostmask tilted her head to the side.

"Why do I remind you of him?" she asked.

Paledusk's green eyes brightened as he was pulled out of the unpleasant thoughts.

"Slatewhisker was always an idealist," he said. "Seasons ago, SkyClan was having trouble with a group of rogues who lived in the two-leg place. He wanted there to be peace between the two groups."

Paledusk shook his head.

"Tragically though that was why he died," he said. "Against Fennelstar's wishes, he went on a diplomatic mission into the two-leg place speak to the rogues. But a fight broke out between them, and he was killed."

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"If he died though, then why do cats think he ran off?" she asked.

Paledusk's brow furrowed, his tail beginning to twitch.

"His body was never recovered," he explained. "A dog or a two-leg got to him before we could."

Paledusk's gaze darkened.

"But, I know he died," he said in a low voice. "You see, I went after him when I noticed that he had left camp. I was worried he'd gone off to do something impulsive and bird-brained... and unfortunately I was right. I found him, but not in time. I saw him get struck down by the rogues. I tried to save him, but I was out-numbered. The rogues chased me off, and by the time I got back, his body was gone."

He shook his head suddenly as if to dislodge the dark memories. He glanced at Frostmask, his green gaze serious.

"I know I haven't regained enough respect or am worthy yet to give you any advice," he said. "But, I don't want you to suffer the same fate as my brother. Ideals are good, but one must also acknowledge the bounds of reality. It's usually best not to create waves..."

Frostmask's tail began to twitch. She wasn't sure if she like how intently Paledusk was looking at her.

"Right..." she muttered, hoping that answer would satiate him.

It seemed to work because good humor returned to Paledusk's eyes.

"You're a smart cat, though," he said. "I probably don't even need to be telling you such things, since you've had to take care of yourself for so long. You know better than to do anything rash— you're a survivor. Like your mother."

Curiosity pricked through Frostmask. She wanted to ask Paledusk more about May. She wanted to find out more about what she was like. How they met. Why they got together.

But, then Paledusk got to his paws before she could even open her mouth to ask.

"I should probably head back to my camp before I'm missed, and I'm sure you need to do the same," Paledusk said. "I hope I see you at the next gathering, but if not, I will be here again on the next new-moon if you wish to meet again."

Impatience and frustration nipped at Frostmask. She didn't want to risk meeting him again or trying to covertly speak to him at the next gathering. But, this meeting and the small, tantalizing bits of information she'd gotten from him about her mother only made her desire to know more about May and Paledusk stronger.

Frostmask cast a quick glance up towards the sky. She couldn't see any sign of dawn yet, but she knew that Paledusk was right about the night wearing on. She gave a small sigh of acceptance and rose to her paws.

"You're right," she meowed. "Goodbye."

Paledusk dipped his head to her.

"Goodbye. It was a pleasure talking to you, Frostmask."

Uneasy Encounters

Frostmask padded back into camp, a measly shrew clutched in her jaws. It had been all she'd managed to find on her way back to camp after meeting with Paledusk. She wished she'd been able to catch more prey, but the sky had started lightening, and she knew she should be back at camp before sunrise or she'd definitely be missed when Grovepelt organized patrols for the day.

As she ducked under the thorn barrier, her paws were tired from roaming the forest all night, but her still mind buzzed from her conversation with Paledusk.

He seemed different this time. More open and less abrasive. Charming almost. I know he's still got a temper, but maybe he's actually friendlier than I thought. Maybe he does just want to get to know me.

Her ears flicked as her mind shifted to what Paledusk told her about Slatewhisker.

That must have been terrible. Maybe missing his brother is what makes Paledusk so temperamental. Larchtail did say they were inseparable before Slatewhisker vanished.

Frostmask blinked, a sudden thought striking her.

Larchtail! She's Slatewhisker's daughter, so that makes her my kin! She has littermates too, doesn't she? Argh, but I can't remember their names. Do any of them have kits? Either way, that's a lot of kin! I have cousins! More family in SkyClan.

Frostmask's thoughts reeled as she padded through the still-quiet camp to drop the shrew in the fresh-kill pile.

She could hardly believe it. She'd gone so long feeling like she had no blood relatives anywhere, and now she suddenly had almost more family members than she knew what to do with.

Frostmask felt a small flicker of warmth in her chest.

I'm glad that out of all of the cats in SkyClan, I'm related to Larchtail. She'd be the one I'd pick.

Frostmask's thoughts turned to the next gathering, and she began to wonder if she'd be able to see Larchtail then. Of course she couldn't tell her that Paledusk was her father, but it would be nice to get to know the SkyClan warrior better.

Frostmask blinked, her thoughts suddenly interrupted by a voice.

"Frostmask, may I speak to you for a moment?" Grovepelt meowed.

Frostmask's stomach flipped as dread spiked in her. She turned towards him, and she spotted the deputy sitting in the deep shadow of Clanrock, evidently waiting for the rest of the Clan to gather so he could assign the patrols for the day.

Oh no, is he going to ask where I went all night? And, why I only came back with a shrew?!

Her mind spun for a good excuse even as her paws carried her over to him. Frostmask gingerly sat down next to Grovepelt, her muscles tense in preparation for an intense questioning. Grovepelt green eyes were unreadable as he gazed at her.

"I'm glad I ran into you this morning. I wanted to tell you that Sedgestar and I've spoken. I know he told you the truth of your ancestry," he said, his voice low.

Frostmask blinked. This wasn't the line of questioning that she was expecting, but her muscles stayed tense regardless.

"Yes," she said tightly. "I know you knew it too."

Grovepelt dipped his head in concession.

"And, you're angry with him, with me, with Redclaw?" he asked, his mew calm.

"Yes," Frostmask repeated, the tightness in her muscles only

worsening.

"I'm sorry for the way Sedgestar told you," Grovepelt said, his gaze lowering in regret. "He let his fear and his anger at the attack get the better of him."

"At least I know now," Frostmask murmured bitterly as her tail-tip twitched. "It's better than letting everyone lie to me my whole life."

"Sedgestar thought he was doing what was best for you and the Clan," Grovepelt said, an ear angling towards her.

A spark of anger lit in Frostmask's chest.

"How does he know what's best for me?" she snapped, glaring at him.

Grovepelt gazed evenly back, and Frostmask broke eye-contact first, dipping her head to him in a sort of apology. Even though she was upset, she knew that the wise deputy still deserved her respect.

"I'm sorry, Grovepelt," she murmured. "I shouldn't yowl at you. Honestly, I'm not that angry with you... I know you were just following Sedgestar's orders."

"And, Redclaw was not?" Grovepelt challenged, flashing her a sharp glance from his green eyes.

The fur on Frostmask's shoulder's stiffened.

"It's different," Frostmask said, doing her best to keep a growl from her voice. "Redclaw raised me."

"Yes, she did. And, she loves you," Grovepelt said with gentle insistence. "Even though she knows the truth. It never mattered to her. Doesn't that make her love all the more genuine and true?"

Frostmask blinked hard, turning to gaze out into their camp so Grovepelt couldn't see the pain in her eyes.

"Do you know the number of times Redclaw came storming into a Sedgestar's den to yowl at him about any little thing he was

thinking about doing in regards to you?" Grovepelt continued in a soft voice. "She always fought for you."

"Then why did she lie to me?" Frostmask whispered in a hoarse voice.

Grovepelt hesitated for a moment.

"She's a loyal warrior. It would've been difficult for her to disobey direct orders from Sedgestar," Grovepelt murmured. "And, maybe she also thought it was the right thing to do. That you'd be happier in ShadowClan if you didn't know."

Frostmask's ears flattened. Maybe that was true. Things would certainly be less complicated if she didn't have any SkyClan kin.

Frostmask sighed, shuffling her paws on the ground as the tension drained from her body.

"Maybe you're right," Frostmask said softly. "But, it still hurts. What Sedgestar and Redclaw did to me. The lie..."

She stared down at her feet, picking at the ground a bit more with her claws.

"It was already hard enough for me growing up, feeling like I didn't belong because I wasn't born here. But, I tried really hard to prove myself, only to find out all my fears were true. That ShadowClan and Sedgestar doesn't trust me. It feels like it took away everything in my life. Everything I worked for in ShadowClan. Even who I thought I was."

Her brow furrowed.

"I feel like I'm still trying to figure out who I am now that I do know,"she confessed.

Grovepelt sighed.

"I wish Sedgestar had spoken to me before he talked to you that night," he said, his voice contrite. "I would've tried to stop him. It was a huge mistake for him to accuse you like that, and I know he's

sorry for it."

Frostmask frowned down at the ground, not quite sure if she believed him. She did at least think that Grovepelt believed he was telling the truth, but did *Sedgestar* actually think that?

...That she couldn't say.

"It's true. He is," Grovepelt said, evidently reading the doubts on her face. "I know it will be difficult for you to forgive him for doubting your loyalty, but Sedgestar still thinks you are an exceptional warrior, Frostmask."

Frostmask's tail-twitched, but she still didn't respond.

"Have you every wondered why Sedgestar made you a mentor as such a young warrior?" Grovepelt asked.

Frostmask's ears pricked in confusion at the sudden change in conversation. She glanced over at Grovepelt.

"Because he thinks that Lizardpaw and I are a good match," she meowed. "That we understand each other because of the trials I went through, and that he'll go through, to become a warrior. Sedgestar told me so himself."

Grovepelt dipped his head.

"That is all true," he murmured. "But, even if Lizardpaw was not deaf, I feel confident that one of Snakeeyes' or Dawntail's kits would've been assigned as your apprentice."

"Why?" Frostmask asked, puzzled.

"Well I'm not getting any younger," Grovepelt said with a quiet, amused purr. "I know Sedgestar had been molding Swoopstrike to be my replacement as deputy, but after his tragic death... Sedgestar is again searching among the younger generations. As all deputies are required to train an apprentice before accepting the role, I believe you are a candidate."

Frostmask stiffened suddenly, her eyes widening.

"What?" she said. "Really?"

She expected Grovepelt to start purring in amusement, almost certain that this was all some sort of big joke, but Grovepelt just nodded, his green gaze serious.

"He hadn't spoken to me about it directly," Grovepelt meowed. "But, his intentions seem obvious enough. At least, to someone who has known him as long as I have."

Does Sedgestar ever do anything without having an ulterior motive?!

Frostmask blinked in shock before bowing her head, her mind spinning as it processed Grovepelt's words.

Me?! Possibly deputy? Is that even something I want?

She gave her head a small shake, her chest tightening in anxiety. It felt like way too much responsibility. Too much pressure.

Besides, how could I ever be a deputy to a leader who doesn't trust me?

She blinked again, trying to send away the worry so she could focus.

There must be other candidates though. Sedgestar might not even pick me, even if something does suddenly happen to Grovepelt. The other cats that got their first apprentices around when I did were Pineshade, Dampfang and Rowanheart. Rowanheart and Pineshade make sense. Rowanheart is Sedgestar's son and a brave, level-headed warrior. And, Pineshade has always been a natural leader... But, is Dampfang really a candidate too?!

Frostmask frowned and tried to look at his merits objectively.

He is an exceptionally talented fighter. And, brave. He isn't afraid to challenge Sedgestar, which others might see as disrespectful, but maybe Sedgestar thinks it's a good idea to have a deputy who can stand up to his leader? Although I certainly wouldn't what him as my deputy, even given those positive traits...

"Does that mean you believe the other candidates to be

Rowanheart, Pineshade, and Dampfang?" Frostmask asked, blinking away her thoughts.

Grovepelt dipped his head in confirmation.

"See, that quick mind is what Sedgestar finds so impressive about you," he meowed the compliment with a soft purr. "Yes. I think those three are the others he's considering. And, I suspect perhaps Snakeeyes as well."

"Do any of them know?" Frostmask asked, her tail twitching.

Grovepelt shook his head.

"I don't believe so," he said. "Not unless they figured it out on their own. I don't think even Swoopstrike knew, and he had been basically singled-out by the end. Sedgestar likes to keep his intentions close to his chest, and I think he doesn't want the knowledge of his interest influencing anyone's behavior."

Frostmask's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Then why did you tell me?" she asked.

Grovepelt tilted his head to the side.

"Well, I was hoping it would help restore some of your faith in Sedgestar," he said. "And, I don't think it will go to your head as it may with our more... arrogantly-inclined friends."

Frostmask gave her head a small shake. What Grovepelt was saying still hardly seemed real to her tired mind. How could she *really* be on Sedgestar's short-list of potential deputies? It felt like something out of a dream. Or, a nightmare.

"Still, probably best to keep this information to yourself," Grovepelt continued with a purr. "I doubt Sedgestar will be very pleased with me if it becomes the gossip of the camp."

Frostmask gave a small sigh.

So many secrets...

Her shoulders sagged almost like they were weighed down by the force of them, but she dipped her to Grovepelt.

"Of course," she said.

Grovepelt nodded, and got to his paws to leave her. Some cats had emerged from the warriors' den now and were grooming themselves in camp as they waited for Grovepelt's orders.

"Grovepelt?" Frostmask asked before he could pad off, suddenly remembering her conversation with Paledusk.

"Yes?" he said, glancing back at her with his kind eyes.

"Er— I have weird question," she said, forcing a purr. "Does the name 'Darkstar' mean anything to you? I overheard some cats talking about a 'Darkstar' during the gathering, and it's been driving me crazy with curiosity."

"Darkstar was the leader of SkyClan when I was a young cat, before Fennelstar," Grovepelt said, studying Frostmask curiously. "But, that's ancient history now. Why would cats be talking about him?"

"I'm not sure either," Frostmask lied, hoping Grovepelt didn't notice the fact that her pelt prickled uncomfortably. "But, I think it was a group of older SkyClan warriors talking about him. Something about how the fighting between ThunderClan and SkyClan was Darkstar's fault."

Grovepelt's eyes lit up with a memory.

"Ah! Darkstar gave away SkyClan land to ThunderClan towards the end of his reign," Grovepelt said.

"Really?" Frostmask said, widening her eyes with manufactured surprise. "Why'd he do that? Maybe the reason that SkyClan took ThunderClan territory this past moon is because they feel like they deserve their old land back?"

Grovepelt's tail twitched, his eyes unfocused as he seemed to lose himself in deep thought.

"I don't remember why he did it," he said. "But, I think that could certainly be why SkyClan is being so aggressive with ThunderClan now."

His gaze sharpened, and he nodded approvingly at Frostmask.

"Thank you for telling me this," he meowed. "I'll pass it on to Sedgestar. It's always useful for us to understand our enemies' motives."

Frostmask dipped her head to Grovepelt, and he padded off towards the group of warriors to assign patrols. During their conversation, the barest hint of the sun had crested the horizon, and the ShadowClan camp had come alive. Snakeeyes and Rowanheart were taking Hollowpaw out of camp for training. Darkpelt was chatting with Greytail and Flymask as they shared a meal by the elders' den, and Frostmask could hear Mosspounce shamelessly flirting with Thornheart as the two of them left on a patrol with Dappledpelt and Leafbreeze.

Frostmask stifled a yawn. She decided she wouldn't allow herself to nap until it was sun-high. The thought of slacking off on her duties because she was too tired from speaking with Paledusk during the night made her feel terribly guilty. She needed to help take care of her Clan, regardless of how tired she was.

A flash of motion in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Frostmask spotted Redclaw padding into the nursery, carrying a bundle of moss in her jaws. Frostmask hesitated a moment, her heartbeat picking up, before she padded after her, feeling encouraged to speak to her as her conversation with Grovepelt replayed in her head.

As Frostmask peered beneath the roomy bramble bush, she saw Redclaw, Larkfoot, Amberberry and Pineshade inside. Larkfoot was busy clearing the nursery of old moss, while Amberberry plugged drafty holes in the bramble wall, and Pineshade and Redclaw arranged fresh moss into a new nest. They were clearly getting the nursery, which had been unused for a moon, ready for new occupants.

Frostmask's thoughts about Redclaw all evaporated as her gaze settled on Pineshade, her stomach clenching in dread.

Why is she helping the queens fix up the nursery? Oh StarClan, she can't be... She and Dampfang aren't—

"Frostmask!" Larkfoot's pleasantly surprised voice interrupted Frostmask's thoughts when she noticed her head sticking in the den. "Is there something you need?"

"Uh... just wondering what was happening in here," Frostmask managed to say, her gaze flicking from Larkfoot back to Pineshade, who had stopped smoothing down moss to glance up at her.

Amberberry purred loudly.

"I'm expecting my second litter!" she announced, her eyes shining. "I'm due in little under a moon!"

Frostmask's gaze flew to Amberberry as relief crashed over her. She realized that the queen did look a little plumper than all of the other cats in the den, who had a typical leaf-bare leanness to them.

I don't know how I missed that! Maybe I'm more sleepy than I thought.

"Oh! Congratulations!" she said quickly to hide her surprise.

Frostmask stepped into the den and gave the golden-furred queen a purr. Now that her feelings of surprise and relief that Pineshade wasn't the one expecting kits faded, a warm glow of happiness for Amberberry kindled in her chest.

"Mosspounce and Murmurstep must be eager to meet their little siblings," Frostmask added. "And, I'm sure Kestrelmoon is ecstatic as well."

Amberberry nodded.

"I can't wait to be raising little kits in the nursery again," she meowed wistfully. "You all are so big now!"

"I feel exactly the same way," Larkfoot purred.

Amberberry leaned against her friend's side.

"I'm glad you'll be in the nursery to help me out again," Amberberry said to the older queen before shooting Redclaw a look. "Although we'll miss you Redclaw!"

Redclaw purred but didn't look up from the moss that she was meticulously placing down. Redclaw's shoulders were tight, and Frostmask bent her head to rasp her tongue down her chest self-consciously as she realized that Redclaw must be feeling awkward because she was here.

"...Unless you and Weaseltail decide to have a second litter as well," Amberberry teased. "Then it'll be just like old times!"

Redclaw glanced up then, her gaze flicking over Frostmask and Pineshade before resting on Amberberry.

"I think all those kits already gave me more than enough trouble the first time around," she said drily. "If I had a second litter, those ones might very much kill me."

The queens purred while Pineshade rolled her eyes, and Frostmask dipped her head to rasp her tongue down her chest in embarrassment again. Frostmask then picked her way slowly over to Redclaw, being careful not to kick over any of the piles of old moss in the process.

"Hey," Pineshade meowed suddenly as Frostmask stepped by her. "Why were you looking at me like that?"

Frostmask blinked, glancing over at her.

"Like what?" she asked.

"When you first came into the nursery, you were staring at me like I'd grown a second head," Pineshade said with a snort. "So what's wrong? Have I got old moss all over my face or something?"

"Oh," Frostmask said with an awkward purr, her tail-tip twitching. "Er— well for a moment when I saw you helping with fixing up the den, I thought maybe... you were the one expecting kits."

"Me?!" Pineshade said, her eyes widening.

Pineshade shook her head, an incredulous purr of amusement bursting from her chest.

"No way!" she meowed. "I'm *never* having kits."

Frostmask's eyes widened slightly.

"Never?" she echoed. "Why not?"

"Well, I'd hate being stuck in camp for six moons," Pineshade said, her purr fading and her brow furrowing as her mood turned serious. "Not to mention the thought of tiny bodies growing inside of me freaks me out."

Pineshade shuddered before glancing around at the three queens in the den with her.

"No offense," she added. "It's not that I don't *like* kits. It's that I just don't want any of my own."

"None taken," Larkfoot purred. "There's no shame in not wanting to raise kits. And, queens should only have kits if they want them. No one should be forced into it!"

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

Do I want kits one day?

It wasn't something that she's really considered before. She'd always liked kits; even as an apprentice she hadn't minded playing with or watching over Snakeeyes' litter when the queen needed a break from them. But, the thought of having kits of her own filled her with a confusing mixture of dread and excitement. Excitement about finally having family around her who were related to her by blood... But dread about the kits being treated poorly as she was—they'd be part rogue and part SkyClan after all.

And, would she even know how to be a good mother to them? She had Redclaw, Amberberry, and Larkfoot to model herself after of course, but she wouldn't be able to protect the kits from everything,

no matter how hard she tried... and how would she know if she was doing the right thing for them?

Frostmask's stomach sank as a new realization weighed it down.

Which must be exactly what Redclaw felt about me.

Frostmask's eyes flickered back over to her. Redclaw had gotten back to work with forming the new nest. Frostmask gazed at the heartbreakingly familiar pattern of red and black patches on her side.

Frostmask had often thought of Autumnleap as her biggest defender, but now she realized she was wrong. Before Autumnleap had even become her friend, it was Redclaw who was there. Starting from the instant that May died, Redclaw had been the one guarding and supporting her.

She didn't have to. Maybe things would've even be easier for Redclaw if she didn't— it certainly would've caused her less strife between Redclaw and Pineshade at least. And, yet, she hadn't even hesitated. One moment May had been next to Frostmask, cold and gone, and then it was Redclaw, fiery and alive, curling her tail around her and pulling her into her soft pelt. Arguing for Frostmask, even against her own kits, and according to Grovepelt, fighting for her behind the scenes.

How many other things had Frostmask taken for granted from her? All the quiet sacrifices Redclaw must have made when she chose to love and raise Frostmask despite the insistence of many others who told her not to bother.

She always tried her best to take care of me... and I've just been treating her like snake-dung lately.

Frostmask's whiskers drooped. She took the last few steps that brought her to Redclaw's side.

"Can I talk to you outside for a moment?" Frostmask murmured.

Redclaw's ears pricked in surprise, and she glanced up at Frostmask. She stared at her for a moment before giving a nod and

straightening. The two of them padded out of the den, and Frostmask led them to a secluded area by the thorn barrier. Frostmask turned to face Redclaw, swallowing around the lump that suddenly appeared in her throat.

"I- I..." she rasped, staring at the ground by Redclaw's feet since she was unable to meet the queen's eyes. "I understand now that you were just doing your best. I shouldn't hold it against you. I'm really sorry for the way I've been acting."

Redclaw was silent for a moment, and Frostmask made herself look up at her face, half-expecting a scolding from the stern queen. But, Redclaw's green eyes were soft as she stared at Frostmask's face.

"I know I'm not May," Redclaw whispered. "And, I could never replace her, nor do I want to. But, I do love you Frostmask."

Frostmask's paws shook slightly.

"Even though I said so many terrible things to you?" Frostmask rasped, her heart twisting in guilt.

Redclaw gave a brief rumble of laughter.

"Yes," she said. "Of course I still do."

"I love you too, Redclaw," Frostmask whispered.

A loud purr burst from Redclaw chest, and she stepped forward, pressing her cheek against Frostmask's, and at that gentle contact, a dam broke inside of Frostmask. Her body began to tremble uncontrollably as she pressed her face into Redclaw's neck and shoulder.

"You wanted me when no one else did." Frostmask's voice was thick with a sob and muffled by Redclaw's fur. "Even when I didn't want to let you in. You still chose me. Thank you."

"It's okay, little one," Redclaw soothed, pressing her muzzle against Frostmask's cheek. "I am so grateful StarClan led you to here to ShadowClan."

For a few moments, neither of the two spoke. The only sound was the constant, soothing rumble of Redclaw's purr as she comforted Frostmask. Once Frostmask calmed down, she pulled away from Redclaw, her pelt prickling slightly as some embarrassment about her sudden breakdown set in.

"Why don't we go back to the nursery to finish helping the others?" Redclaw suggested gently.

Frostmask nodded, clearing her throat awkwardly. But, Redclaw didn't seem to mind her embarrassment, and Frostmask felt lighter than she had in sunrises as she followed Redclaw back to the nursery. As they approached the den, Frostmask saw that Murmurstep had come over to help too, and she had more new moss for the nests clutched in her jaws as she ducked into the nursery. She was smoothing it down with Pineshade's help as Redclaw and Frostmask entered back into the den. Pineshade looked up as the two of them rejoined the group, clearly oblivious about the nature of the conversation between Redclaw and Frostmask.

"The nest is looking pretty good," Pineshade declared, rising to her feet and stretching her legs out. "I think I might take Cricketpaw out now, if you don't need anymore help. It's already way past sunrise, and I'm sure that 'paw is still in her nest, sleeping!"

Frostmask purred, in a sudden good mood.

"At this rate, she'll think you've gone soft on her," Frostmask teased. "I don't think Swoopstrike ever let me sleep one wink in past sun-up."

Pineshade raked a sharp look over Frostmask.

"Sounds like the raven's calling the crow black, because I don't see Lizardpaw hiding under your tail either!" she shot back.

Frostmask's tail twitched, her brow furrowing. She couldn't think of a good quip in response because she realized Pineshade was right. Pineshade shot her a smug look, clearly knowing that was the case, while Murmurstep poorly disguised her *mrrow* of amusement at the

situation with a cough.

"I think Larkfoot, Amberberry and I can handle the rest, thank you," Redclaw said with a purr, steering the conversation back to topic.

"Yes, this *is* part of my job now, after all," Larkfoot said as she helped Amberberry patch up the den's walls.

Amberberry's gaze flickered over Frostmask, Murmurstep, and Pineshade.

"If you three still want to help, though, I've been craving squirrel," she purred. "Although I haven't seen one in the fresh-kill pile for sunrises!"

Larkfoot clicked her tongue.

"Well that's because they're surely all curled up in their nests from this cold weather!" she said.

"But, they have to come out to dig up their nut stores at some point, or else they'd waste away," Amberberry argued back. "The rest of the latest snowfall just melted off yesterday, maybe they're out forging now!"

Larkfoot just hummed doubtfully.

Pineshade turned away from the bickering queens to cast an amused glance at Murmurstep and Frostmask.

"Well, are you guys up for this very important squirrel hunting mission?" she asked.

Murmurstep shot an affectionate glance at her mother.

"I'm in," she purred. "I'd be happy to get you a squirrel, Amberberry."

"I'll go too. I wanted to take Lizardpaw hunting anyway," Frostmask said.

"Alright. Let's go grab our lazy apprentices!" Pineshade said, leading

the way from the den with an eager bounce in her step.

Frostmask and Murmurstep followed her out. By the time they'd made it into the clearing, Pineshade had already vanished into the apprentice's den, and then was just as quickly coming back out with Lizardpaw and Cricketpaw in tow. Frostmask purred at the apprentices' ruffled fur and bleary eyes. It looked like Pineshade literally dragged them from sleep and their nests without even giving them a moment to orientate themselves.

However, as Pineshade and the apprentices approached them, Frostmask's amusement evaporated as she caught sight of a dark pelt. Dampfang strode up to Pineshade, whose steps slowed as he approached.

"Taking Cricketpaw out?" he asked.

His gaze flicked from the dilute tortoiseshell apprentice and over to Lizardpaw, where it stayed, his brow furrowing.

"What are you doing with him?" Dampfang rumbled.

Pineshade nodded towards Frostmask and Murmurstep, who were still standing a few fox-lengths away from her.

"We're going hunting," she meowed, her tail-tip twitching.

Dampfang cast a glance over his shoulder towards them. He caught sight of Frostmask, and his nose crinkled up slightly.

"Ah," he drawled, turning back to Pineshade. "I was going to ask if you wanted to do some training with Cedarpaw and I, but now I see that you're... busy."

Pineshade shifted from paw to paw uncomfortably.

"We could maybe patrol together this evening," she mumbled.

Dampfang seemed to soften somewhat.

"Alright," he said, touching his muzzle to her cheek in farewell. "See you then."

Pineshade nodded, visibly relaxing as she rumbled a brief purr. As Dampfang padded off, Frostmask glanced over Murmurstep. She looked as uncomfortable with the interaction between Dampfang and Pineshade as Frostmask felt; her ears were twisted back and her expression tight as her golden tail twitched slightly.

Frostmask gave her head a small shake to push her thoughts of Dampfang away as Pineshade and the apprentices finally joined them.

"You both ready?" she asked Frostmask and Murmurstep.

Murmurstep nodded, her eyes brightening with Dampfang's disappearance, and Frostmask gestured for Pineshade to lead the way. Pineshade turned towards the camp's exit, her spiky-furred tail held high.

"Watch out squirrels!"

They had bad luck with finding any squirrels, but a good time hunting. Frostmask knew that Cricketpaw and Lizardpaw always had fun when they got together, although Frostmask had also found that Lizardpaw's distractibility tended to increase substantially when he was on a patrol with one of his younger den-mates. At those times, Lizardpaw seemed much more interested in playing with, or showing off in front of, Cricketpaw, Cedarpaw, and Hollowpaw, than he did listening to Frostmask.

Still though, Frostmask was happy to see Cricketpaw in a good mood. She and her littermates had been understandably depressed for the past moon— with the death of Dawntail during the raid, and then Buzzardpaw following her only a half of a moon afterwards.

Also, despite his inattention towards Frostmask, Lizardpaw still proved himself invaluable when it came to tracking down faint prey trails, although they didn't have any luck finding one that belonged to a squirrel.

Frostmask enjoyed patrolling with Murmurstep too. She hadn't spent much time with her old den-mate for the past few moons, since Frostmask got so busy training Lizardpaw. But, Frostmask

rather liked the she-cat. Murmurstep normally wasn't very talkative, but when she did speak, her remarks tended to have a biting wit.

Murmurstep and Pineshade appeared to have remained close since their apprentice days, however. Frostmask knew that when she and Pineshade had had their fight and weren't speaking a couple moons ago, Pineshade had started spending a lot more time with both Murmurstep and Mosspounce. Although, Frostmask privately suspected that Pineshade preferred the quieter sister. Mosspounce could be a bit over-enthusiastic at times.

The three she-cats now trailed behind their apprentices, who were partly tracking prey, and partly playing tag, several fox-lengths ahead.

"How's training Lizardpaw going?" Pineshade asked, blinking at Frostmask.

Frostmask's tail twitched.

"He's making good progress," she meowed, glancing over at her apprentice as he and Cricketpaw scampered ahead of them. "He masters each battle move I teach him really quickly. He's a very good hunter too, although sometimes I have to remind him things like brushing up against plants makes noise."

Pineshade nodded.

"Cricketpaw's hunting is coming along well, but she needs to be more confident with her battle training," she said, her brow furrowing slightly. "Maybe her and Lizardpaw can do some battle training together soon. It might make her feel more self-assured if she practiced against another apprentice."

Frostmask mewed in agreement.

"You two are lucky that you got apprentices so soon," Murmurstep sighed, her thick-furred tail twitching.

Frostmask was quiet, her thoughts drifting back to the conversation she had with Grovepelt earlier.

"You'll get your own soon enough," Pineshade responded with a dismissive ear flick. "Maybe you'll even get to train one of your little siblings."

"Yeah, but that'll be over six moons from now!" Murmurstep complained, her ears angling back.

"If you want, you can join me and Cricketpaw when we do some training," Pineshade offered. "I know it's not the same as having your own apprentice, but you'd be able to get some experience mentoring. And, maybe Sedgestar would appreciate the initiative and be more inclined to assign you one from the next group of kits."

Murmurstep ducked her head shyly. She didn't reply for a moment, instead turning her head to rasp her tongue down her pale golden-furred side, flattening her slightly prickling pelt.

"Thanks," she mewed finally in a soft voice. "That's very kind of you. I'd like that."

Pineshade nodded.

"Of course," she said.

"So, is Mosspounce also eager for her own apprentice?" Frostmask asked, pulling herself out of her thoughts about Grovepelt and Sedgestar and deputyship.

Murmurstep huffed in amusement, shaking off her bout of bashfulness.

"No. She's not looking for that kind of responsibility," Murmurstep said. "Mosspounce is much more focused with flirting with every available cat in the Clan instead."

Frostmask tilted her head thoughtfully.

"I saw her talking with Thornheart earlier," she meowed.

"Well, she was padding after Hootflight yesterday," Murmurstep laughed.

"And, Autumnleap the day before," Pineshade added with a purr of amusement.

Frostmask's ears perked up.

"Autumnleap?" she echoed, her paws prickling.

"Don't worry," Murmurstep said, giving a reassuring blink. "He didn't humor her for long."

Frostmask ducked her head, her ears burning with sudden heat.

"I- I didn't mean," she stammered. "Autumnleap can do whatever—"

"Ugh, are you still doing this?" Pineshade interrupted loudly, rolling her eyes.

Murmurstep swallowed back purrs as Frostmask's pelt prickled indignantly.

"Pineshade," Frostmask hissed, shooting a brief, but pointed glance at Murmurstep before looking back over at her.

Pineshade waved her off with a swish of her tail.

"Oh relax. Murmurstep knows about you and Autumnleap. I mean, practically the whole Clan knows!"

Frostmask fur warmed even more.

"They do? How?" she asked.

"Well, it's not like your affection for each other is some big secret. If it was, you two should stop acting so cute together in public," Pineshade said with another eye roll, but there was a purr beneath her words. "Our clan-mates just haven't said anything to you because ShadowClan, out of all cats, knows how to respect privacy."

"Well, it sounds like everyone's accepted it *but* Frostmask," Murmurstep teased gently.

Pineshade purred louder while Frostmask swiped her tongue down

her chest fur vigorously.

"It's just complicated, alright?" Frostmask mumbled into her fur, hoping that would put an end to this conversation.

But, of course, she wasn't that lucky.

"How?" Murmurstep asked, tilting in her head in confusion.

Frostmask cast a glance over at the apprentices, both to check up on them and make sure that they were still not paying attention to the older cats' conversation.

"Well... I'm afraid of being with him, then losing him," she admitted in a low voice, not able to meet Pineshade's or Murmurstep's gazes.

Pineshade scoffed.

"Is that possibility worth seeing him end up with someone like Mosspounce?" she asked, arching a brow.

Frostmask's ears twitched back, and she didn't respond.

"You know you can't keep him waiting on you forever to make up your mind," Pineshade continued, her voice turning slightly sharper as she came to her brother's defense. "That's not fair to him."

"I know," Frostmask sighed, her gaze downcast. "I'm just scared. What if we're together and something bad happens to him... and he- he- he *dies.* It'd destroy me."

"Yeah, but there's nothing you can do to change the fact that bad things happen," Pineshade said rationally, her tail twitching. *"Everyone* dies. You either learn to live with that, or you ignore it by making sure you don't get close to anyone, being miserable and alone forever."

Frostmask's tail twitched, but she couldn't deny the logic in Pineshade's words.

She has a point.

Frostmask's thoughts drifted to Paledusk, SkyClan and the state of the forest. With tensions between the Clans escalating everyday, the future of both ShadowClan and the whole forest was terrifyingly uncertain.

Maybe the only way to cope is to take what happiness I can, ***while*** *I still can.*

"You might be right," Frostmask said.

"Besides," Murmurstep broke in with a soft mew. "Are you really saving yourself any heartbreak by not being together? It's not like that stops you from having feelings for him or anything."

Pineshade nodded in agreement.

"That's true too," she said. "Honestly, your entire plan here is starting to sound really frog-brained, Frostmask."

Murmurstep didn't say anything, but she shot Frostmask a look that seemed to say that she agreed with Pineshade. Frostmask huffed, twitching her tail again.

"Alright. Alright. I get it," she grumbled. "StarClan. When did this conversation turn into 'let's all tease Frostmask?'"

"You just make it too easy for us, Frost," Pineshade laughed.

"Does that mean you're going to talk to him?" Murmurstep pressed.

"If I say yes will you both put a mouse in it about it?" Frostmask quipped, shooting Pineshade specifically a glare.

"I can't make any promises," Pineshade warned, her tail flicking mischievously.

Murmurstep began to purr in amusement, and Frostmask shot her a sharp look as well.

"Don't encourage her!" Frostmask jokingly protested.

Before Murmurstep or Pineshade could say anything else,

Lizardpaw and Cricketpaw came bounding back over to the group of warriors, both of their pairs of eyes wide and their pelts prickling nervously.

"Lizardpaw said he smells rat!" Cricketpaw's voice was high-pitched and squeaky with fear as she dug unsheathed claws into the ground.

"Rat?" Pineshade echoed, her pelt rising.

The fur on Frostmask's shoulders bristled too. She knew Pineshade and Lizardpaw must remember the horrifying sight of the cannibalistic rats as well as she did, and although Cricketpaw hadn't seen them for herself, she had seen the damage they'd done to her brother. Frostmask shuddered, trying to shake off the memory.

"We're not that close to the Carrionplace, are we?" Murmurstep asked, blinking in confusion.

"Not really," Frostmask confirmed.

"We need to investigate this," Pineshade said grimly, turning to Lizardpaw.

'Show us where,' she ordered.

Lizardpaw nodded, setting his jaw determinedly. The patrol broke into a brisk trot as he led them off to the left, and it wasn't long until Frostmask's nose twitched as she picked up the sour scent of the creature too. It appeared to just be a single individual, but the fact that it had wandered so far outside the bounds of the Carrionplace was certainly strange and troubling. The scent was fresh, and it grew stronger as the patrol gained on it. As they drew closer, Pineshade signaled for Lizardpaw to fall back as she took the lead. The group prowled around the trunks of the pines, and Frostmask's gaze flashed as she caught a flicker of movement near the roots of a large tree.

"There," she breathed, signaling towards it with a flick of her tail.

But, this rat hardly seemed to be a threat. It was bone-thin and lying on the ground on its side, its flanks heaving. One of its dark beady eyes flashed towards the cats, glimmering as it saw them and

realized their danger. But, the creature seemed like it didn't have the strength to stand. It just lifted its head, baring its large, yellowed teeth and letting out a squeak in a half-hearted warning to the cats.

Frostmask's nose twitched as she picked up another scent from the animal. Lizardpaw glanced over at her, noticing her sniffing.

'Rat blood,' he signed, confirming her suspicions.

Frostmask nodded. She couldn't see any wounds on the rat from this distance, but the salty tang in the air was unmistakable.

I wonder if the rat is even injured, or is the blood from it eating one of its brethren?

Frostmask shivered.

"What's wrong with it?" Cricketpaw muttered.

"It could be injured," Frostmask said. "Or, just sick or starving."

"Or, all three," Pineshade suggested. "Maybe it wandered out here to look for food."

"Or, escape from *becoming* food," Frostmask muttered, and Pineshade gave a grim nod of agreement.

"Should we kill it?" Murmurstep asked, staring unblinkingly at the rat. "Fresh-kill is fresh-kill."

Frostmask's tail twitched as she and Pineshade shared an uneasy glance. Murmurstep was right that any prey was valuable in the dead of leaf-bare, but the idea of eating the cannibalistic rats that lived among two-leg trash was rather... unappealing.

"Maybe we should just leave it to be crow-food," Pineshade said. "What if it *is* sick? We shouldn't eat it then."

Frostmask felt a flicker of relief. Pineshade's point was reasonable, and it meant that they could leave the rat be.

*I don't want to be anywhere **near** one of those things.*

"Good point," Frostmask said, nodding.

Murmurstep also meowed an agreement, and Pineshade signaled for the patrol to depart. As they turned away from the rat and padded off into the forest, Frostmask cast a final glance at it from over her shoulder. The rat watched the cats walk away for a few moments before it finally lowered its head back down to the ground. Letting out a quiet, almost pained, squeak, it closed its eyes.

Pestilence

Frostmask tilted her chin up towards the dark indigo sky, watching as her foggy breath drifted towards the stars. Shivering slightly, she pressed herself closer to the warmth radiating off of Poolcloud, who was crouching at her side. He barely responded to her touch; his muscles were stiff and his eyes glazed over as he blankly stared down at the body of Fogfur in front of them.

Frostmask's gaze dropped down to Poolcloud's former mentor, and mournfulness welled in her chest. In the last half a moon, greencough had taken root in Fogfur's lungs, and the once powerful warrior had wasted away. Now his long grey fur clung to a body that seemed to be made from nothing but skin and bones— just a shadow of his former self.

Frostmask pressed herself against Poolcloud's side again, this time in an attempt to comfort him, but still he didn't glance at her or even flick an ear in her direction. Frostmask looked out over Fogfur's body, her gaze meeting with Autumnleap's. She could see the same concern she felt for Poolcloud shining back at her in his amber eyes.

The sound of someone's throat clearing made Frostmask glance up. All the elders, besides Flymask, who was sick with greencough now and much too frail to leave his nest, were padding over. They had come to preform a death ceremony yet again.

These are becoming much too regular.

Frostmask rose to her paws, respectfully taking a step back to make room so Greytail, Treefur, and Darkpelt could stand over Fogfur. Poolcloud however, still didn't move from Fogfur's side, and Dewleaf had to gently nudge him to his paws, guiding him back. Poolcloud pressed himself hard against her, his expression bleak as he continued to gaze at Fogfur. Frostmask noticed Treefur also

looked especially grief-stricken, and a faint memory from her apprentice ceremony resurfaced as she recalled that Treefur had been Fogfur's mentor.

It was he who had the honor of beginning Fogfur's ceremony.

"Fogfur, you've served ShadowClan honorably for many seasons as a brave and powerful warrior, but sickness can claim even the strongest among us," Treefur rasped, his cloudy eyes mournful.

Darkpelt limped forward, his brow furrowed.

"You have fulfilled your warrior vows, and so we release you from your oath to ShadowClan," he rumbled, gazing down at Fogfur. "Now, the endless expanse of our ancestor's hunting grounds awaits you, where you are free to roam, healthy and young once again."

Greytail stepped forward now to conclude the ceremony.

"Journey to StarClan now with claws sharp, eyes bright, and tail held high! Go, and receive your warrior's welcome!" she yowled, lifting her gaze to the sky.

The Clan began to stomp their paws against the ground. Frostmask threw her head back, lifting her voice along with her clan-mates.

"Fogfur! Fogfur! Fogfur!" they cheered, honoring the fallen warrior one last time.

As the final note of their yowls faded, Clearstream strode forward. Her blue eyes reflected starlight, and seemed to shine with a mystical wisdom that Frostmask could never even hope to understand.

"Fogfur hunts with our ancestors now," Clearstream said. "The body he left behind will be buried at dawn."

Some clan-mates began to quietly murmur among themselves. It was late in the night, past the time that most cats would be in their nests, and now that the ceremony had concluded many cats turned to go to their dens to rest a bit before dawn. Frostmask stared at them as they walked away, her stomach twisting as she swept her

gaze over their thin frames and tired eyes. Frostmask knew that the start of new-leaf couldn't be more than a couple of moons away, but right now it felt like leaf-bare would never end.

Frostmask recalled Grovepelt once saying that late leaf-bare was always the most difficult time of the season because by then, all of the forest and prey were at their weakest from suffering so long from the cold. Frostmask's gaze flickered to Dampfang as he brushed past her. Even he lately seemed like he didn't have the energy to antagonize Frostmask or pester Sedgestar about when ShadowClan would get their revenge against SkyClan.

*You know times are tough when even **Dampfang** can't muster the strength to be a frog-brain.* Frostmask mused.

"Are you staying out?" Autumnleap's voice asked her softly, interrupting her thoughts.

Frostmask blinked, turning towards him as he padded over to her, before her gaze flickered over to Poolcloud again. He'd gone back to crouching next to his mentor with Dewleaf sitting supportively at his side. Treefur and Marshnose were among the others who had stayed to continue to hold vigil for Fogfur.

"I think I might sit with Poolcloud for a while longer," Frostmask said in a soft voice, so it wouldn't reach anyone's ears but Autumnleap's.

Autumnleap's eyes were round with sympathy as he glanced over at his brother.

"Poor Poolcloud," he murmured. "I know he really admired Fogfur and having to watch him slowly decline like this..."

"It must have been hard," Frostmask agreed, sighing quietly.

Autumnleap nodded, and Frostmask's ears flattened against her head.

"When will leaf-bare end?" she lamented to no one in particular.

"We'll get through this," Autumnleap said, raising his chin

confidently.

"I hope so," Frostmask murmured.

Autumnleap brushed his pelt reassuringly against her side, and Frostmask's fur warmed at the touch. She was reminded that she hadn't had the chance yet to speak with Autumnleap after the conversation she'd had with Pineshade and Murmurstep about a half a moon ago.

Her stomach flipped with nerves.

It's not like I'm not avoiding talking to him; I've just been busy and it just hasn't felt like the right time yet! She tried to argue with herself, giving her ears a small shake.

"Are you going to head to your nest?" Frostmask asked him, pushing those thoughts away.

"I'll stay out for a bit," Autumnleap said.

Frostmask nodded and settled back down by Poolcloud. Autumnleap crouched at her side, and only a heartbeat later, Pineshade appeared, squeezing herself next to Poolcloud so she could lightly brushing her tail over his back.

"We're all here for you," Autumnleap murmured, leaning over Frostmask to touch his nose to Poolcloud's ear.

Poolcloud finally lifted his gaze up from his mentor's body. As he glanced around at Dewleaf, Pineshade, Frostmask and Autumnleap, his amber eyes welled with emotion.

"Thanks guys," he whispered.

All of them huddled even more tightly together, as if the could drive away more than the icy air with the warmth of their shared pelts.

Frostmask's paws dragged as she, Lizardpaw, Rowanheart, Snakeeyes, and Hollowpaw made their way back to camp the next day. Their patrol had left at dawn to hunt, and Frostmask barely got

any sleep last night because of Fogfur's vigil, but more than exhaustion was weighing her down now.

They had spent all morning fruitlessly searching the forest for prey. The entire patrol had only gathered one mouse, caught by Rowanheart, and one shrew, tracked down and dug out of its burrow by Lizardpaw.

Frostmask's stomach clenched painfully, reminding her that the last time she'd eaten was yesterday morning. Frostmask closed her eyes for a moment, comforting herself by reliving her memories of last green-leaf, when ShadowClan's marshes and pines were so full of prey, it felt like you couldn't take a stride without almost stepping on a frog or a skink. Now though, all the reptiles and amphibians had disappeared to hibernate until the weather turned warm again.

Frostmask had never been the biggest fan of scaly fresh-kill, but now her mouth watered at the thought of sinking her fangs into a large, juicy lizard or frog.

Frostmask blinked her eyes back open as their downtrodden patrol reached the thorn barrier of their camp. Squeezing through the tunnel, they emerged into a subdued camp. Cats were outside their dens, enjoying the weak leaf-bare sunlight, but the camp didn't have the typical relaxed energy of ShadowClan at sun-high. Her clan-mates just mostly seemed exhausted. They were tightly pressed together in groups, but it seemed much more out of a utilitarian need for heat than out of a desire to enjoy each other's company.

Frostmask's patrol first headed over to the fresh-kill pile; if it could even be called a *pile.* Right now there were only two mice and a bird sitting there. Frostmask turned to Lizardpaw as Rowanheart dropped his mouse with the others.

'Why don't you take your shrew to Amberberry?' she suggested. *'I'm sure she'll appreciate it. Then you can take a break afterwards; you've earned it.'*

Lizardpaw nodded, his gaze flickering from Frostmask to the meager fresh-kill pile behind her.

'There's not enough for me to have anything to eat right now is there?' he asked.

Even though the thought of denying Lizardpaw food felt like claws pricking at her heart, Frostmask gave her head a small, regretful shake.

'The elders have not been fed yet today,' she signed. *'But we will eat something caught by the sunset hunting patrols later. I promise.'*

Lizardpaw nodded, his whiskers drooping slightly. He walked off to the nursery with the food for Amberberry.

If there's still not enough prey for everyone in the evening, I'll give Lizardpaw my share. Frostmask swore to herself despite her stomach clenching in hunger.

"Poor scrap," Snakeeyes murmured to Frostmask as she watched her son pad away. "He's a new-leaf kit— not used to have an empty belly."

Rowanheart stepped over to his mate's side.

"The weather will turn soon enough," he meowed. "No leaf-bare lasts forever."

Frostmask nodded, trying to imbue herself with Rowanheart's optimism. Her gaze flickered across the camp, searching for a distraction from her yowling belly.

"Hey Frostmask!" Mosspounce chirped cheerily, waving her golden tail to catch her attention.

Frostmask spotted her sitting and chatting on the other side of the camp with Pineshade and Murmurstep.

"Join us!" Mosspounce called.

Frostmask approached the group, giving a purr in greeting, and Mosspounce scooted over to make space for Frostmask to sit next to her. Frostmask crouched down, but before she could even tuck her paws under her chest, Mosspounce eagerly leaned into Frostmask's

side, nestling herself into Frostmask's much longer and fluffier pelt.

Frostmask blinked in stunned surprise.

"Did... did you somehow trick me into coming over here, just so I could be your personal fur-warmer?" Frostmask asked, staring at Mosspounce in bewilderment.

"Whaaat?" Mosspounce said, dragging out the syllables. "No..."

She then pressed herself even deeper into Frostmask's thick pelt, making her defense all the more unconvincing. Pineshade and Murmurstep burst into purrs, and Frostmask couldn't help but laughing as well at the brazenness of Mosspounce's plan.

"Okay, so maybe I did little," Mosspounce admitted, withdrawing from Frostmask's pelt slightly. "But, that doesn't mean that I also don't appreciate your company, Frostmask! It's just that my fur is so short, and Pineshade was hogging all of Murmurstep's pelt! Even though Pineshade's fur is already longer than mine, so Murmurstep should really be sharing with me!"

Frostmask glanced over at them, and did notice that Mosspounce was right about the two she-cats being pressed closely together.

"What! You're not entitled to my pelt," Murmurstep protested as she blinked indignantly at Mosspounce.

"You're my sister! Of course I'm entitled to it," Mosspounce said, lolling her tongue out tauntingly at Murmurstep.

"Maybe Murmurstep just likes me better than you," Pineshade sniffed, giving Mosspounce a teasing glance from narrowed eyes. "I don't spend every heartbeat meowing into her ears. Every moment. Of both your lives."

Mosspounce huffed offendedly as Frostmask and Murmurstep purred with amusement. But, then motion in the corner of Frostmask's vision drew her eye, distracting her from the playful bickering. It was just Sedgestar walking across the camp clearing, but something seemed off about him. Instead of his normal confident and purposeful stride, his gait was hesitant and unsteady;

his amber eyes bleary as he made his way in the direction of the medicine cats' den.

Frostmask's shoulder fur bristled in fear and worry.

"Is Sedgestar sick?" she hissed in a low voice, interrupting Mosspounce, who had been saying something else.

Silence fell over the group as all their eyes turned to their leader. They watched as Sedgestar paused a few fox-lengths away from the medicine cats' den, swaying slightly on his paws.

"Oh no," Pineshade murmured.

Pineshade's ears flattened back, and she rose to her paws as if she was about to rush over to help him. But, they weren't the only cats that noticed Sedgestar's state. Before Pineshade could even take a step, Emberflower had hurried to her mate's side, her eyes dark with concern.

"Sedgestar! Are you okay?" she asked, pressing her flank against his to steady him.

"I'm... I'm not feeling well," Sedgestar rasped.

Frostmask tensed in shock as she spotted crimson beads of blood form on Sedgestar's lips, dripping from his mouth as he spoke. Emberflower stiffened as well, her green eyes widening.

"Clearstream! Elmclaw!" she yowled, whipping her head in the direction of their cave. "I need your help! Something's wrong with Sedgestar!"

At Emberflower's cry, the heads of everyone in camp snapped towards Sedgestar, and a gasp of worry rippled through ShadowClan.

Just as Clearstream poked her head out of the lichen covered entrance to the medicine cat den, Sedgestar collapsed to the ground.

Blood was streaming more quickly from both his mouth and his

nose now, and it showed no sign of slowing. Sedgestar's shoulders strained as he struggled to pull his paws back under him as Clearstream and Elmclaw sprinted over. A tense hush fell over the camp as the eyes of all of ShadowClan stared in fear at their leader. Rowanheart was now at his mother's side, and the two of them stared down at Sedgestar with identical distressed green eyes. Grovepelt rushed over as well, his ears pinned back in horror as he circled Sedgestar.

"Stay down!" Clearstream ordered, putting a gentle paw on Sedgestar's flank to stop him from trying to rise back to his paws. "What happened? Are you in pain? Injured? How do you feel?"

"Exhausted," Sedgestar managed to say, his amber eyes half-lidded. "My head hurts."

Watching him speak was horrifying. His teeth were stained red with blood, and more of it just ran from his lips with each movement of his mouth.

"We have to stop this bleeding," Clearstream said, her gaze narrowed with intense focus and concern. "Elmclaw, go get horsetail."

Elmclaw didn't move.

"We don't have any horsetail," Elmclaw said, his eyes round with dismay. "Remember?"

"Snake-dung," Clearstream swore loudly. "That's right."

"Why is he bleeding? Where it is coming from?" Emberflower asked urgently.

Clearstream gently opened Sedgestar's mouth with her paws. Sedgestar allowed her to do so without protest. His body was limp, and Frostmask's stomach twisted as she realized that she wasn't sure if he was still conscious anymore.

"There's too much blood," Clearstream said. "I can't tell. He's not coughing though, so I don't think it's his lungs."

She touched her nose to Sedgestar's ear.

"He's not feverish," she declared. "But, he's deteriorating quickly."

Sedgestar's flanks shuddered as he struggled to breathe. Frostmask dug her claws into the ground, her muscles stiff with horror. She was certain he was unconscious now. His amber eyes were still half-open, but they had lost all their focus and intensity.

"He was totally fine this morning!" Emberflower said, a small wail entering her voice as she circled her dying mate. "Can't you do anything!?"

Sedgestar's sides spasmed more fiercely now, and he retched, but the material that flowed from his mouth was dark red, just more blood being spewed from his body.

"I don't know what's wrong, and we have no herbs to stop the bleeding," Clearstream whispered, her gaze distressed but her mew steady. "His life is in StarClan's paws now."

Dead silence fell over the camp; the only noise was the sound of Sedgestar's lungs rasping wetly with each shaky breath. Grovepelt sunk to the ground next to Sedgestar, rasping his tongue rhythmically over his head and murmuring to him in a low, soothing voice like one might use to comfort a little kit.

Sedgestar hung on for a while, much longer than Frostmask thought he would, judging by the amount of blood dripping from his body. But, then finally, air rattled from Sedgestar's lungs in an exhale, and his flanks didn't rise again.

A sharp inhale reverberated through the clan as if in echo of Sedgestar's final breath.

Emberflower made a soft whimpering noise, and Rowanheart pressed himself against her side, draping his tail over her back comfortingly. A small pool of blood had formed around Sedgestar's head, and his muzzle and chin fur had turned red from soaking in it.

Frostmask stared at Sedgestar's body, every hair on her pelt tense.

She knew that he had nine lives, but she'd never seen him lose one and come back. Truthfully, she didn't even know if he had lost any at all during the time that she'd been in ShadowClan. But, he was her leader; wouldn't she know if he had?

Although, on the other paw, he was a very secretive cat. Maybe this was something he kept to himself... And, who knows how many lives he'd lost before she came to ShadowClan. She knew he'd become leader as a young cat, and so had already led ShadowClan for many seasons now.

But, this couldn't possibly be his *last* life.

...Right?

Sedgestar jerked and gasped, his eyes flying open as a long, shuddering breath inflated his lungs. His back arched as his head was thrown back, and his eyes went so wide, Frostmask could see a ring of white around the amber. His jaws stretched open as if in a silent scream of agony as his body contorted.

Then as suddenly as he had stirred, he dropped back to the ground with a dull thump, his eyes closing again. But, now Frostmask could see his flanks were moving in slow, even breaths— the blood that had been flowing from his nose and mouth had dripped to a stop and was drying on his fur. Emberflower and Rowanheart leapt to his side, crouching down to cover his face in frantic, loving licks, cleaning the blood from him, while Grovepelt sighed, his head bowing in relief. An unsteady purr rumbled in Sedgestar's chest, and he cracked his eyes open.

"I'm alright," he rasped to Emberflower, Rowanheart, and Grovepelt.

He lifted his head up to address the entire watching camp.

"I'm alright," he repeated in a stronger voice.

Frostmask released a tense breath and exchanged relieved glances with Pineshade, Murmurstep, and Mosspounce. Purrs and murmured gratitudes to StarClan echoed throughout the clearing, and now that the crisis seemed over, clan-mates flowed over to

gather around Sedgestar. Frostmask followed Murmurstep, Pineshade, and Mosspounce to join the crowd, gazing at Sedgestar with an odd mixture of horror, awe, and relief.

"Dear StarClan, what happened to you?" Larkfoot gasped, her short fawn pelt bristling with fear and concern. "That was horrible!"

"I don't know," Sedgestar meowed, forcing his paws under him and straightening to a sit. "It came over me so quickly."

Sedgestar began to stand, but Clearstream stopped him by draping her tail over his back.

"Rest longer," she ordered. "StarClan may have healed whatever was wrong, but you still need a few moments to recover your strength."

Sedgestar relented and remained sitting.

"You don't think it's some kind of new sickness?" Dustleap asked, his eyes filled with worry.

His gaze sought out Hollowpaw, Cedarpaw, and Cricketpaw in the crowd, and Frostmask knew he must be terrified of losing his remaining kits like how he had lost Buzzardpaw to greencough.

"It's not like any sickness I've heard of," Elmclaw rumbled, his tail-tip twitching with unease.

"I don't think it is one," Clearstream added, shaking her head. "No disease would come on so quickly."

"Then what could it be?" Darkpelt asked before turning to Sedgestar. "You haven't recently gotten injured, have you?"

Sedgestar shook his head in reply.

"Well, it could've been just something was wrong with Sedgestar's body," Clearstream meowed, shooting Sedgestar a look out of the corner of the eye. "Sometimes, something goes wrong, or organs fail for seemingly no reason, and it kills a cat."

Frostmask saw her clan-mates brows begin to furrow with concern.

"But, if that was the case, then StarClan has healed the malady," Clearstream continued. "Besides that though, there's only one other option that I can think of..."

She hesitated, her ears flicking with nervousness.

"What?" Sedgestar prompted, his gaze unwavering as he stared at her.

"...Poison," Clearstream responded finally, her mew reluctant.

Frostmask's ears flattened as a fresh wave of confusion and worry rippled through the clan.

"Poison?" Emberflower echoed, taking a protective step closer to Sedgestar. "But, how? Sedgestar isn't frog-brained enough to eat something like deathberries."

"It's not deathberries," Clearstream said with assertive head-shake. "That kills very differently. Although deathberries aren't the only poison in the forest."

She turned to Sedgestar.

"I need you to tell me exactly everything you ate and drank for the past day," she said. "And, did anything you consume taste off at all?"

"Not at all," Sedgestar said, shaking his head. "All I had was water from the pools around camp and prey from the fresh-kill pile."

"It can't be the water," Clearstream muttered, half to herself. "If it was, more cats would be sick. So it must be the prey."

Our food has been poisoned?!

Frostmask's stomach flipped in fear, an emotion that was echoed by her clan-mates as they began to let out concerned mews. Sedgestar shot a glance around the camp before turning back to Clearstream.

"Are you sure that it's poison?" he whispered.

Sedgestar's low voice was clearly intended to only reach Clearstream's ears, but Frostmask was standing close enough to them to pick his words out from the fearful muttering of the crowd.

"You might be worrying them for no reason," he added.

"I'm not sure, but it needs our immediate attention either way," Clearstream whispered back. "If we ignore it, and it actually *is* poison, it could happen again to one of our clan-mates. One who doesn't have nine lives."

Sedgestar had no response to that.

"What if this is the rotten pine!?" Mosspounce's frightened voice rang out above the murmuring.

Sedgestar lifted his head and swept his gaze over his clan.

"We don't know that for sure," he reassured, his voice firm but calm.

"But, we also don't know that it's not," Marshnose fired back, his brown tabby and white pelt prickling. "Fogfur died yesterday, and now you lose a life today? That sounds like an omen that ShadowClan's starting down a path to ruin to me."

"Could this be SkyClan's doing?!" Greytail demanded, curling her lip up to bare yellowed fangs. "Could they be trying to poison us?"

The muttering of the crowd rose in volume to hisses and growls as cats began to argue. Some yowled out in agreement with Greytail, while others pushed against her.

"That's frog-brained," Treefur growled to his den-mate. "How could SkyClan have snuck into camp to poison our prey?"

"How did they attack our camp without warning?" Greytail shot back.

"Do you think they targeted Sedgestar on purpose?!" Mosspounce gasped, her eyes wide.

"It's not SkyClan!" Murmurstep hissed at her in response.

"I've been telling you this all along!" Dampfang shouted, lifting his tail and baring his fangs. "It must be the work of a traitor! Someone is working with SkyClan!"

Hisses of shock echoed Dampfang's words. Frostmask dug unsheathed claws into the ground, struggling to keep her expression neutral.

I'm no traitor to ShadowClan, but if they found out that I met with Paledusk, they'd claw me to shreds before I could even explain anything!

"No! It can't be!" Amberberry gasped in fear, her eyes wide as she swept her tail over her belly protectively.

"Enough! *Enough!"* Sedgestar yowled, rising to his paws and lifting his tail for attention. "We will figure this out, but panicking won't help us."

The cats slowly settled back down, although they still stared at each other like wide-eyed owls. Frostmask's fur bristled slightly as she felt suspicious glances brush over her pelt. She looked around with a sharp gaze, daring any of her clan-mates to meet her eye and challenge her loyalty to her face, but no one did. Frostmask did however notice that many of her clan-mates were directing paranoid glances towards several cats, not just her, and she felt strangely relieved that she wasn't the only cat under scrutiny.

Grovepelt rose to his paws as well, standing at Sedgestar's side with his chin raised high. He swept his gaze over the clan, his green eyes narrowed in fury.

"Proposing that any one of our clan-mates would be a traitor to ShadowClan and wish for Sedgestar's death is the most *ridiculous* thing I've ever heard," Grovepelt hissed, and Frostmask thought that she'd never heard the deputy's voice sound so icy. "I know that every cat here would give their life to save each other without hesitation. Don't forget that StarClan told us that ShadowClan gets its strength from our loyalty to each other."

Grovepelt locked his searing gaze on Dampfang.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," he spat.

Dampfang bowed his head dutifully, but his voice was still confident as he spoke out.

"I just don't think we should rule out any possibilities," he said. "How else could Sedgestar have been poisoned, if someone didn't put it in the fresh-kill?"

A low growl rumbled in Grovepelt's throat.

"You should not throw out such weighty accusations without proof," Grovepelt insisted. "There may be another explanation for the poison. We just need some time to work it out."

Sedgestar nodded.

"Yes," he meowed in agreement. "We are getting ahead of ourselves. We still don't even know for sure if the poison came from our fresh-kill pile. Clearstream knows more about diseases, herbs, and poisons than any other cat in the clans. If anyone can figure out what happened, she can."

Sedgestar turned back to her.

"What should we do next?" he asked.

Clearstream shook out her long grey tabby pelt and took a deep breath.

"Let's go back to the prey you had for your latest meal," she meowed. "What have you eaten today?"

Sedgestar shook his head.

"I didn't eat today," he responded. "The fresh-kill pile has been low, so I didn't want to take anything. The last thing I ate was yesterday, around sun-high. It was a mouse."

Clearstream nodded.

"It might have been that mouse then," she said before sweeping her

gaze across the crowd. "What cats led hunting patrols yesterday morning or the evening before?"

Beeclaw, Kestrelmoon, Redclaw, and Leafbreeze stepped forward.

"Where did each of you hunt?" she asked.

Redclaw and Leafbreeze reported that their patrols had both hunted near the Burnt Sycamore the day before yesterday. Yesterday morning, Kestrelmoon had led his hunting patrol by the WindClan border, while Beeclaw's patrol had hunted in the woods around the Carrionplace.

Grovepelt's ears pricked up.

"The Carrionplace?" he echoed.

Beeclaw nodded in confirmation, looking at the deputy.

"I noticed that prey was running well there," he meowed. "I think it's because they've been eating the two-legs' trash."

Grovepelt's brow furrowed in concern. Sedgestar gazed at him intently, reading the thoughts in his expression.

"You don't think the two-legs could have anything to do with this?" Sedgestar asked, his brow furrowing.

Grovepelt's thin tail twitched uneasily.

"Many seasons ago, when I was a newly made warrior," he began slowly. "There was an outbreak of a strange disease in leaf-bare that claimed the lives of many cats."

He shot a glance over at Greytail.

"Do you remember that season?" he asked her.

"How could I forget?" the elder growled, her fur prickling. "The sickness killed my sister."

"Describe what the disease was like," Clearstream interrupted, her

tail twitching with a hint of impatience as the older cats recalled the grim memories. "I've heard stories about the outbreak, but I was only a kit at the time. Much too young to remember any details about the symptoms."

"It began with cats just feeling weak and tired," Grovepelt meowed. "Then as the days passed, it progressed to a small amount of bleeding from the nose and mouth. Cats grew weaker and weaker and then succumbed. The whole process never took more than a quarter moon from first feeling of weakness to death."

He shot a glance over at Sedgestar.

"So there were some similar symptoms, but it was never as swift and violent as what happened today," he said.

He looked back at Clearstream.

"Could it be possible that what we thought was a disease was actually a poison?" he asked. "Something that is happening again?"

"I think it's the best lead we have," she meowed, her gaze dark. "How was this outbreak contained?"

Grovepelt's gaze unfocused as he got swept up in the memory.

"At that time, we still often hunted rats in the Carrionplace," he meowed. "However, once our cats began to fall ill, we noticed that the rats there appeared ill too. We stopped hunting at the Carrionplace, and no more cats got sick. That's why we assumed the disease came from them, and how we learned that the Carrionplace contained more danger than just the rats themselves."

Frostmask's stomach flipped sickeningly as she recalled the odd behavior of the rat her patrol had came across in the woods only a half moon ago. She stepped forward, her pelt prickling.

"When I was patrolling with Pineshade and Murmurstep a little under a half-moon ago, we saw a weak rat out in the forest, near the outskirts of the Carrionplace," she said. "We thought it was sick or injured. But, maybe it was poisoned."

Pineshade and Murmurstep muttered confirmations. Grovepelt gazed at Frostmask, his expression grave.

"I still don't understand," Emberflower interrupted, shaking her head. "If it's a poison that's hurting the rats, how did it affect Sedgestar, or those other cats seasons ago? We're not eating the poison, and diseases can jump from animal to animal, but poisons cannot."

"We *are* eating the poison. Through our fresh-kill," Clearstream said, her voice low. "The prey goes to the Carrionplace and somehow eats two-leg poison. Then we catch that prey and eat it, but the poison remains inside the prey's meat."

Emberflower blinked in shock.

"That's possible?" she asked.

Clearstream nodded grimly, and yowls of concern echoed throughout the camp.

"Is all of our fresh-kill contaminated then?!" Leafbreeze demanded.

"What will we eat?" Treefur growled.

Sedgestar threw his head back to let out another commanding yowl and silence fell over the camp again.

"It seems likely that the poison is coming from around the Carrionplace," he said. "So we will give it a very wide berth to avoid it when hunting. Try to stick close to the borders instead. As for our fresh-kill pile..."

He shot a regretful glance over at it. There were still the few mice and one bird sitting there.

"We throw it all out," he growled. "There's no way to tell what fresh-kill came from where, and we can't risk it being from near the Carrionplace."

"Waste prey in the dead of leaf-bare?" Treefur said with a gasp.

Sedgestar locked his gaze on the elder.

"We can't risk it," he repeated firmly.

He looked around at the crowd.

"Rowanheart, Leafbreeze take care of disposing of them," Sedgestar ordered. "Use your paws to move them and bury them deep so nothing will dig them up and eat them. Then take care to wash your feet off in the stream before doing any grooming. Dewleaf and Weaseltail, scrape fresh dirt over the area where the fresh-kill pile sat. When new prey is caught, we will make a new pile over there."

He jerked his muzzle to a spot several fox-lengths away from the current pile.

"It can't hurt to be careful," Sedgestar growled.

The cats he named scrambled to obey him, and Sedgestar turned to Grovepelt.

"We need to send out extra hunting patrols to restock the pile," he meowed.

Grovepelt nodded, but before he could say anything, Beeclaw stepped forward, his ears flat against his head.

"It's my fault that the poisoned prey was brought to camp," he said, guilt marring his expression. "I shouldn't have led my hunting patrol near the Carrionplace yesterday."

Sedgestar shook his head, gently touching his tail tip to the dark warrior's shoulder.

"There was no way you could've known," he meowed. "Besides, StarClan has had mercy on us since I was the only one who fell ill."

"But, do we know for sure that you were the only one poisoned?" Beeclaw asked, his tail twitching.

He shot a worried look over at Elmclaw and Clearstream.

"Is there anything you can do to stop the poison before a cat gets sick? Something you could give to someone who might have also eaten prey caught by my patrol?" he asked.

Elmclaw glanced uncertainly at Clearstream.

"There's yarrow which can induce vomiting after someone eaten something poisonous..." he meowed.

"But, that only works if it's taken shortly after the poison was eaten," Clearstream muttered. "Sedgestar ate the mouse last sun-high. Presumably anyone else who ate poisoned food would've done so yesterday around that time. It would be much too late for yarrow to do anything now."

Frostmask was suddenly extremely grateful that she and Lizardpaw hadn't eaten since yesterday morning, but her fur bristled with worry for her friends as she looked around the camp. She noticed her clan-mates were doing the same thing— gazing at one another with wide, somber eyes as if expecting one another or themselves to collapse at any moment. Frostmask swallowed with difficulty, her mouth suddenly dry.

She turned to Pineshade to whisper in her ear.

"When was the last time you ate?" she asked.

"This morning," Pineshade whispered back, her eyes round with worry. "Autumnleap and I shared a vole."

Frostmask's heart jumped up to her throat.

"Autumnleap?" she rasped hoarsely, searching for his pelt among the crowd. "What about Poolcloud?"

"I think the last time he ate was yesterday morning," Pineshade muttered. "He didn't feel like eating at all after Fogfur passed. What about you?"

"Yesterday morning too," she said, still gazing at the crowd.

Her eyes had found Autumnleap. He was staring out at Sedgestar,

Beeclaw and the medicine cats, his auburn pelt prickling with fear.

"Then you two should be fine," Pineshade murmured. "You ate before Beeclaw's patrol came back. We will have to see about me and Autumnleap... But, I think it's much more likely that we ate prey brought in from a later patrol's than from Beeclaw's."

Pineshade turned to ask Murmurstep and Mosspounce about when they'd last eaten, but Frostmask's head was too filled with a roaring sound of fear for Autumnleap and Pineshade to hear their response. She jerked, snapping out of it for a moment as Sedgestar raised his voice for attention again, lifting it above the worried murmuring of the Clan.

"Remain calm!" he meowed. "The only thing we can do now is wait. If we make it through the rest of the day without anyone else getting sick, I think we will be in the clear. But, if someone starts not feeling well, head to Clearstream and Elmclaw immediately! Those of you who know for sure that you did not eat from Beeclaw's patrol, go see Grovepelt for hunting assignments. Everyone else, remain in camp so you can get immediate treatment if you start feeling ill."

Clearstream disappeared back into the medicine cat's den to check on their herbs and make any needed preparations while Elmclaw strode up to Sedgestar.

"I want to run to the ThunderClan camp and ask Fallowtuft for horsetail," Elmclaw rumbled. "It's the only herb that'd stand any chance at stopping the kind of bleeding that happened to you."

Sedgestar gave him a curt nod.

"Go," he meowed.

Elmclaw sprinted out of the camp, his face dark with concentration as he rushed through the thorn barrier.

The clan then slowly began to split into two halves. Frostmask took one step over towards Grovepelt before glancing back at Pineshade. Pineshade lifted her chin, putting on a confident expression and

giving Frostmask a nod.

Frostmask sent a silent prayer up to StarClan, pleading for Pineshade and Autumnleap to be alright as she and Lizardpaw joined the group of cats around Grovepelt. As Grovepelt began dividing up the patrols, Frostmask glanced over at the cats in the other group again, her eyes scanning over the pelts. There was Pineshade, Autumnleap, Mosspounce, Darkpelt, Larkfoot, Dewleaf, Hootflight, Thornheart, Dustleap, and Cedarpaw over there.

Frostmask was so focused on the storm of worry raging inside of her, she hardly blinked in acknowledgement as Dappledpelt gestured for her and Lizardpaw to join her patrol. The group headed out into the forest, but Frostmask's thoughts and attention remained with the cats who were left at camp.

Frostmask's whole body sagged with tiredness as she stumbled back that evening. Since she hadn't been able to catch up on any rest during sun-high, exhaustion had taken over completely. This patrol had just about as much luck as the earlier patrol as well, and the whole group had only managed to retrieve three pieces of prey.

As they entered the camp through the thorn barrier, Frostmask's head snapped up, her gaze scanning the clearing for the cats that had remained. She breathed a sigh of relief as she spotted Autumnleap, Pineshade, Poolcloud and Dewleaf sitting near the edge of the camp in the shelter of the thorn bushes, looking just as fine as they did when she left them, but their brows were furrowed with worry as they gazed at a group of cats gathered near the entrance of the medicine cats' den. Frostmask dismissed Lizardpaw with a gesture of her tail and bounded over to the four cats.

"Are you all doing okay? What's going on?" Frostmask meowed quickly, not bothering with greetings.

"We're fine," Autumnleap said, glancing over at her.

"But, Hootflight just became sick," Pineshade murmured, her jaw clenching.

Frostmask glanced back over at the cats gathered near the medicine

cats' den. Hootflight was lying in a nest that had been made in the shelter of Clanrock, but outside of the den, likely to keep him away from Flymask and his greencough. Hootflight's pale grey flanks rose in short, shallow breaths as blood dripped from his nose. Elmclaw was back from ThunderClan, and he was now coasting Hootflight into eating some herbs. Clearstream was nestling more moss around Hootflight to keep him warm, while his brothers Thornheart and Beeclaw crouched near his side, whispering to him as they groomed his fur.

Sedgestar and Grovepelt were near Clanrock as well, although they kept a few tail-lengths of distance away from Hootflight, giving his family and the medicine cats space. Dampfang and Darkpelt also watched from a short distance, standing side by side. The father and son wore identical distressed expressions as they gazed at Hootflight. Darkpelt had been Hootflight's mentor, and Dampfang was one of his closest friends.

"Is he the only other cat who's gotten sick?" Frostmask whispered.

Autumnleap nodded, his expression sober.

"Will he be okay?" she asked.

"I don't know," Autumnleap muttered. "It came over him just as quickly as it happened to Sedgestar."

Frostmask's stomach twisted as she glanced at the grey tom again. She'd never been particularly close to Hootflight— he was Dampfang's friend after all. But, she still didn't want to see her clan-mate die.

A shudder passed through Hootflight's body, and he let out a low, pained moan.

"You can fight this," Thornheart growled in encouragement, rasping his tongue fiercely across Hootflight's forehead.

"...I'm so tired."

Hootflight's hoarse voice was so faint, Frostmask's ears just barely picked it up.

"You've got to hold on," Beeclaw pleaded, pressing his face into his brother's neck fur.

Hootflight didn't respond, but his flanks still rose and fell in shaky breaths. A few more moments stretched on, and then he stilled as his body fell limp. There was one tense hush of silence, and then a mournful yowl rose up from Beeclaw.

"No, Hootflight!" Beeclaw cried. "This is my fault!"

He fell forward over his brother, gripping his body with his paws as if he could will him back to life. Thornheart screwed his eyes shut, his jaw clenching. Clearstream crouched down to press her ear to Hootflight's chest, checking for a heartbeat. She stood up again slowly, her gaze downcast as she shook her head. Elmclaw came over to Beeclaw, pressing his pelt against the smaller tom's side.

"There was nothing we could do," Elmclaw whispered, his green eyes round with sorrow. "I'm sorry."

"This isn't your fault. It's *mine,"* Beeclaw hissed, lifting his head from Hootflight's side, his eyes bright with anger and pain. "I killed him."

Elmclaw tensed.

"Don't say that!" he rumbled fiercely. "You did nothing wrong. None of us had any knowledge about the poison before now."

Beeclaw turned his face away from Elmclaw, refusing to meet his eyes.

Frostmask sighed heavily, her head bowing as she took in Thornheart's grief-stricken expression and Beeclaw's guilt-ridden one. The fur on her side stirred as Autumnleap rose to his paws.

"I need to try to help Beeclaw," he said in a low voice before striding over to his former mentor.

"Thank StarClan you weren't poisoned," Poolcloud murmured to Dewleaf, pressing his muzzle to her ear.

"But, poor Hootflight," Dewleaf whispered, gazing out at the camp.

"He was so young... only five moons older than me. Dampfang and Darkpelt must be devastated."

Frostmask blinked as Pineshade walked away from them too. She padded up to Dampfang, whose face was crinkled up in fury and grief. Pineshade murmured something to him too low for Frostmask to hear, but Dampfang turned to her, bowing his head to bury his face in her pelt.

While the sun set, Hootflight was moved to the center of the camp. As his body was prepared for vigil, Clearstream insisted that the blood be washed from his fur with damp moss, rather than groomed, as to not risk any cat coming into contact with even trace amounts of the poison. She told the clan that there should be no risk in touching or being close to tom, only with grooming him, but Frostmask noticed that most mourners kept a careful tail-length of distance between themselves and Hootflight, as if they thought that the poison could burst out of his body and bite them.

Having not been particularly close to Hootflight, Frostmask hung back at the edge of the camp as the sky darkened, and his vigil began. Thornheart and Beeclaw sat the closest to Hootflight, at his head.

Beeclaw's gaze was bleary as he stared down at his brother. He had been so distraught earlier that Clearstream and Elmclaw had given him some sort of calming herb. Now he was much stiller and quieter, but none of the pain in his eyes had dimmed.

Frostmask closed her eyes, her heart clenching as she imagined how terrible it would feel to be in Beeclaw's position. It hardly seemed fair either— Beeclaw's disposition was so patient and kind. He certainly never did anything to deserve such torment.

Frostmask's eyes flickered back open as her gaze swept over the clan. A different sort of weariness clung to her clan-mates now, flattening their ears and drooping their tails so they dragged in the dirt. As if leaf-bare and the other clans weren't threats enough, a new predator stalked their camp. And, this one was invisible, undetectable and utterly deadly.

Frostmask swallowed hard, her mouth dry.

It felt like every cat still alive now had avoided the poison out of sheer luck, and luck was all that would keep them from it going forward. Sedgestar's order to avoid hunting near the Carrionplace was a sensible one, but Frostmask knew that prey had no sense of borders like the clans did, and they roamed where ever they pleased. Who's to say that a mouse caught near the WindClan border had not come there from the Carrionplace?

*But, we need to eat **something.** Or, starvation will kill us.*

Frostmask's chest tightened as the feeling of dread in her grew. She gave her head a small shake, trying to push it away.

Maybe I should just try to be grateful that no more of us died.

The dread refused to be so easily forgotten though, and it surged back up to gnaw at her bones.

...But, for how long will that last?

"You okay?"

Frostmask jolted, her gaze flying to Autumnleap, who was now standing at her side, staring at her. She shook her ears as if she could dislodge her grim thoughts like she could cold water.

"Yeah. Yeah," she lied quickly as Autumnleap took a seat.

There was no reason to make him worry about her when their Clan was facing much larger, existential problems.

"How's Beeclaw doing?" she asked before Autumnleap could dwell on her words long enough to discover any dishonesty in them.

Autumnleap sighed heavily, his gaze lowering.

"Not good," he admitted freely. "I mean you see him. He blames himself, and he won't listen to reason about that."

"It's been a sudden shock, and he's grieving," Frostmask murmured.

"I'm sure he'll come to realize that Hootflight's death isn't his fault."

Frostmask's gaze drifted over to Beeclaw again.

"Are you sure you should be here talking with me, and not with him?" she asked.

Autumnleap's ears pricked.

"Do you not want me to be here?" he asked, a slight edge of wariness to his voice.

She looked at him quickly, her brow furrowing.

"That's not want I meant," she said. "But, it was like you said earlier. Beeclaw needs you."

Autumnleap glanced away from her.

"He doesn't. Or he doesn't want my help," he said in a low voice. "I think Thornheart is the only one who can comfort him right now. Did you know their parents died back when they were only six moons old? Some freak accident. A fox attack I think. Beeclaw's brothers have been his only family since then."

"I had no idea," Frostmask murmured.

Autumnleap nodded solemnly, staring out into the camp before looking at her suddenly again.

"Do you want to come with me?" he asked abruptly, making Frostmask blink in surprise.

"Come with you?" she echoed, her brow furrowing. "Where?"

"Out into the forest," he meowed. "Somewhere. Anywhere."

He flexed his claws in and out anxiously, scraping them against the frozen ground.

"We can hunt if you'd like. The fresh-kill pile still needs restocking. Or we can just walk. Whatever you want," he said.

Autumnleap dipped his head, his ears flattening.

"I can't sit through another clan-mate's death ceremony for the second night in a row," he confessed in a low, hoarse voice. "I just want to get out of camp. But, I don't want to be alone."

Frostmask gazed at Autumnleap, her heart twisting in pity for him. Like all of her clan-mates, he was thin, but his eyes were also weighed down by bags from sleepless nights. His pelt prickled with worry, and it looked like it hadn't been washed in a couple of days.

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

How had she not noticed earlier how distressed he was?

Maybe that's because he's always the one comforting and calming you, and not the other way around. A guilty voice hissed at her in her head.

"Of course," she said out loud to him.

Autumnleap looked up at her, relief flooding his amber eyes. Frostmask rose to her paws.

"Do you want to go now?" she asked.

Autumnleap nodded, quickly standing as well, and together the two of them slipped out of the camp.

As they wandered through the forest, Frostmask stayed alert for prey scent trails since ShadowClan couldn't pass up any that came their way, but they weren't really searching for prey. They mostly walked in silence, although Frostmask kept a close watch on Autumnleap from the corner of her eye. She noticed him relaxing more and more as they traveled deeper into their territory. Foggy breaths puffed from their mouths as they approached the Burnt Sycamore.

"Are you doing okay?" she asked him, breaking the silence.

He glanced at her with a blink of surprise.

"Yeah," he said. "Being out of camp has helped clear my head."

"That's good," she murmured, not quite looking him in the eye. "Although I also noticed your pelt doesn't look like it's been groomed recently."

Autumnleap's brow furrowed, and he glanced down at his fur as if noticing it for the first time.

"Well I've had a busy past few days," he meowed. "Patrolling and hunting, and helping Poolcloud while Fogfur was dying..."

"I know," Frostmask said quietly. "But, you need to take care of yourself too."

Autumnleap's nose scrunched up in a faint scowl. He was never one who appreciated being told what to do. Even if what he was doing was frog-brained, and he needed someone to tell him that.

It's probably why he and Pineshade are always butting heads. Two bossy cats who hate the other bossing them around!

"I *am* taking care of myself," Autumnleap said.

Frostmask resisted the urge to snort disbelievingly.

Doubtful.

Frostmask stopped walking in the clearing around the Burnt Sycamore so she could look at him properly.

"You know, you can tell me if there's actually something else bothering you," she said.

Autumnleap halted as well. He gazed at her, and for a moment, she saw a flash of hesitance on his face. Frostmask blinked as she was hit with a sudden flare of insight.

"Have you not told me because you're afraid of making me upset?" she asked. "If there's something wrong, I want to be able to help you."

Autumnleap still hesitated, although now some guilt creeped across his expression, and she knew she guessed correctly. Annoyance needled at her.

I'm not some fragile bird that needs to be protected!

"I just don't want to make you worry," Autumnleap said finally.

"Follow me," Frostmask said with a huff, whirling on her heel and striding to the base of the Burnt Sycamore.

"Where are we going?" he asked as he trailed after her.

"We're continuing this conversation, but I just don't want to keep standing out in the cold to have it," Frostmask grumbled.

She found the hole in the roots that she was looking for and slipped inside. It was a small earthen den nestled between the ancient gnarled roots. Frostmask suspected it may have been made by a fox at some point, but whatever it was, it was long gone. ShadowClan would not allow such a dangerous predator to live right in the heart of their training hollow. Autumnleap followed her in. There was just enough room in the den for the two of them to sit comfortably next to each other.

A few heartbeats of awkward silence dragged by.

"It's not a big deal," Autumnleap said finally. "I know the past moon and a half has been really hard on you, ever since Sedgestar did... what he did. And, I don't want to add to your stress."

It was a reasonable point, but it didn't make Frostmask feel any better. Instead she just muttered something incomprehensible, leaned over and rather aggressively began to groom his fur.

"What are you doing?" Autumnleap asked with a blink of surprise.

"Cleaning your pelt, frog-brain," Frostmask growled between licks. "If you're not going to do it, someone has to."

Autumnleap pulled away from her, halting her grooming.

"Are you *mad* at me?" Autumnleap asked incredulously.

Frostmask sighed sharply.

"I don't know!" she said. "Kinda. But, not really. I'm annoyed that you won't tell me what's bothering you, even though I'm also just really relieved and grateful that you survived the day!"

"So what is it: relieved or annoyed?" Autumnleap asked, narrowing his amber eyes slightly.

"I don't know!" Frostmask repeated, digging her claws into the ground. "Both I guess."

Autumnleap clenched his teeth in frustration.

"You don't make any sense," he groaned.

Frostmask's tail-tip twitched in annoyance.

"Tell me about it," she grumbled.

To her surprise, a purr of amusement suddenly burst from Autumnleap. It might have been delirium from her growing exhaustion or from not eating for more than a day, but as he continued to laugh, Frostmask found herself unable to stop her own purr from rumbling louder and louder in her chest.

"Why are you laughing?" Frostmask asked as she tried to swallow back her hysterical purrs.

"You're ridiculous," Autumnleap gasped between the purrs that wracked his body.

"I'm ridiculous!? You're the one who tried to convince me that nothing's wrong when you look like you got hit by a monster!" Frostmask protested.

"Fine. We're both ridiculous," Autumnleap amended.

They purred together for a few moments longer, until the bout of senseless amusement began to fade. As they quieted, Frostmask

found that her annoyance towards Autumnleap was gone. She just felt mostly drained and tired now.

"I just..." Frostmask spoke first, shuffling her paws. "I'm sorry about being snappy. I do just really want to help you though, if there's something wrong."

Autumnleap was quiet for a moment.

"It's nothing in particular," he said finally. "It's been a hard season obviously, and lately I've just been worrying a lot about things. About the Clan. About you. And, then about Poolcloud especially with Fogfur..."

Autumnleap voice trailed off, and he was silent for a moment. But, then he rolled his eyes.

"And, I even worry about Pineshade sometimes," he said, his whiskers twitching in a weak attempt at humor. "Even as frog-brained as she is."

"I didn't know so much was bothering you," Frostmask said softly.

"I'm better at hiding my worry than you are," Autumnleap said, giving a quiet, humorless purr.

"You can talk to me," Frostmask murmured. "About anything... You know?"

Autumnleap scooted back closer to her, brushing his tail down her side reassuringly.

"I know," he affirmed.

Frostmask turned her head and resumed her task of cleaning and smoothing his pelt, more gently this time. Autumnleap was quiet besides the soft purr that rumbled in his chest as she groomed him. A sense of peace settled over Frostmask. There was something rather tranquil about just the two of them being here in this small den, as if its walls could somehow protect them from the suffering that stalked their Clan just outside.

"I'm glad we got this chance to talk though because there's something that I've been meaning to say to you," Frostmask breathed, the words somehow slipping out with ease.

But, when Autumnleap glanced at her, she froze up like a mouse fixed beneath the heat of his gaze, and her words got stuck in her mouth.

"Yeah?" he asked, arching a brow.

Frostmask cleared her throat awkwardly and looked away from him, deciding to stare at the den wall instead.

"I um- Well I've been thinking more about *stuff,* and I've been talking... to Pineshade actually, about it. She's been surprisingly helpful," she managed to say as her heart began to hammer rapidly.

"Wait. 'Stuff?'" Autumnleap echoed, giving his head a small shake. "What 'stuff?'"

Frostmask's heart had jumped up to her throat.

"The conversation we had a couple of moons ago," she murmured, forcing the words out quickly. "The one when you told me you loved me. I well- um- wanted to tell you that I- I love you too."

Autumnleap was dead silent, forcing Frostmask to look at him and make sure he was okay. He was staring at her with his amber eyes stretched wide.

"You... you love me?" he echoed, blinking hard a few times.

Frostmask gave a shy nod.

"Yeah," she whispered.

"...Really?" Autumnleap asked again, and Frostmask couldn't stop a *mrrow* of amusement.

"Yes, frog-brain. That's what I said," she teased gently as her nervousness faded.

Autumnleap began to purr, and he leaned over to rather forcefully rub his cheek against hers.

"Not so hard, you're poking my eye with your fur!" Frostmask said, pulling away slightly, but a loud purr rumbled in her chest.

"Sorry!" Autumnleap said, looking like he was in a bit of a daze. "I'm just... really happy."

He much more gently touched her cheek with his muzzle for a moment before pulling back again, blinking away his stunned expression.

"I'm wondering though, what spurned this change of heart?" he asked, before his eyes widened quickly. "I mean, not that I'm complaining! Of course."

His expression turned playful, which filled Frostmask's chest with a fluttering feeling. She glanced away from him to try to gather her thoughts.

"Yeah, well, you know how I told you that I was afraid of getting attached and getting hurt if you died?" Frostmask said slowly. "I guess I decided that, since life is terrible and cats can die at any moment, instead of trying to isolate myself so I don't get hurt, I should try to find as much happiness as I can, while I can. Before it's gone. And, the poison today kinda just proved that."

She glanced back over at Autumnleap to see a faint frown drifting across his features.

"I'm glad this is the option where you pick happiness," he said. "But, I'm not convinced that overall this philosophy is much better than the last."

Frostmask shrugged, brushing his concern off.

"Besides," she added softly, brushing her pelt against his side. "...I realized that I couldn't really stop myself from getting attached anyway."

Autumnleap purred again, his mood shifting back from serious to

playful. He shot her a cheeky glance.

"Well, I *have* been told that I have an inescapable allure about me," he said

Frostmask let out a huff of amusement, drawing away from him slightly so she could better look at his face.

"An *'inescapable allure?'"* she asked, raising a brow. "Really? And, who told you this? Yourself?"

"No! You did of course!" he exclaimed, purring. "Just now!"

A part of Frostmask wanted to roll her eyes in exasperation, but really she was just mostly pleased that Autumnleap was back to his old playful self after seeing him so downtrodden earlier.

"I definitely did *not* use those words," Frostmask teased, her tail-tip twitching.

"I don't know. That's what I heard," Autumnleap insisted, his gaze sparkling with mischief.

"You're insufferable," Frostmask groaned, but she was still purring. "Don't you dare let this go to your head."

"'Insufferable?'" he echoed, tilting his head to the side as if he was confused. "I actually have, on good authority, that I'm extremely likable. Some could say *lovable,* even."

His purr grew even louder.

"I was just told so by a very intelligent cat. I'd take her word for it, if I were you."

Frostmask tried and failed to shoot him a serious glance.

"Stop this right now, or I'll take it back," she mock threatened.

Autumnleap met her 'stern' gaze with shining amber eyes.

"No. You won't," he purred, easily calling her bluff.

Frostmask sighed, but she purred too. She leaned back against him, and he rested his chin on the top of her head.

"No. I won't," she agreed.

War Games

Reflective eyes glowed softly from the deep shadows under the warriors' den. Mud was already plastered to their pelts to disguise their scents and colors, so as Frostmask's gaze drifted to Emberflower, the only way she was able to recognize her in the darkness was by the color of her pale green eyes. Anticipation prickled down Frostmask's spine as she waited for the senior warrior's signal. Emberflower waited a few moments longer for everyone to rise from their nests before she gave the group a nod. Frostmask and Pineshade turned together, ending up at the head of the patrol since the younger warriors' nests were already closer to the exit of the den.

Frostmask glanced over at Pineshade, and the two of them shared an excited look as they slipped out of the den.

"I bet Lizardpaw notices us coming," Frostmask breathed into her den-mate's ear, her voice barely audible.

"No way," Pineshade whispered back in equally hushed tones. "They'll be out cold. Apprentices like their sleep too much."

"Do you have so little faith in Cricketpaw?" Frostmask teased.

Pineshade's whiskers twitched in amusement.

"All I'm saying is since even *I* didn't notice our mentors coming back when we were 'paws, there's no chance any of those fluff-balls will notice us," Pineshade whispered.

"Of course. Pineshade the Infallible," Frostmask purred.

The edges of Pineshade's lips quirked up in a hint of a smirk, but she didn't respond. Silence settled over the group as they emerged into the dark and still camp. Frostmask crouched down, preparing to stalk around the edge of the camp, sticking to the darkest shadows cast by the thorn wall, but she blinked in surprise as

Dampfang suddenly appeared, brushing past her. His tail slapped her muzzle as he took her place at Pineshade's side at the front of the patrol. Frostmask had to stop a growl of irritation from rumbling in her throat.

She gave her ears a small shake.

I'm going to be stuck with Dampfang all night. She reminded herself. *I can't let him ruffle my pelt so easily.*

Frostmask resigned herself to the middle of the patrol. Redclaw slipped up to her side and gave her a friendly blink, which lifted her mood. Frostmask nodded back at Redclaw, and then focused her attention on the task at hand— hunting their apprentices.

It was ShadowClan tradition for each generation of apprentices to go through this sort of night-stalking exercise, but it would not be identical to the one which Frostmask experienced as an apprentice. Because of the fact that ShadowClan had such hostile relations with SkyClan and RiverClan at the moment, Sedgestar thought this would not only be a good opportunity to train the apprentices, but for the warriors to keep their skills sharp too. Rather than just having the mentors involved, he'd ordered a much larger patrol of warriors to participate in the exercise as well.

Privately, Frostmask also suspected that Sedgestar was doing this to keep the Clan's spirit up. Morale had been extremely low since the poisoning a half-moon ago. No cats had died from poison since then, but Flymask had succumbed to greencough and weakness, with food being even more scarce due to their limited hunting ranges. The previous gathering had even been canceled since the full-moon had been covered by clouds the entire night. Frostmask had heard whispers from her clan-mates about it being a bad omen sent from StarClan.

In general, cats were hungry and miserable. The one bright light in the Clan during this time was that Amberberry had given birth to four little kittens. But, even that joy had been tempered by the fact that the smallest and weakest kitten, a little golden tom that Amberberry and Kestrelflight had named Mintkit, had died a few days after birth.

Frostmask blinked away the depressing thoughts, giving her ears a small shake. Tonight was supposed to be exciting and fun for the apprentices and mentors alike. She could worry and be sad about things in the morning.

Frostmask glanced back at Emberflower, who used a few of Lizardpaw's paw-signs to signal for the patrol to circle the holly bush that formed the apprentices' den. Knowing how sensitive Lizardpaw was to vibrations on the ground from cats walking, Frostmask did her best to put her paws down as lightly as possible as she and the other mentors crept up to the den. The group of ShadowClan warriors slipped up to the edge of the bush, muscles tensing.

Frostmask's ears pricked as she heard a soft shuffling sound coming from inside the den.

"Wha—?" Yewpaw's sleepy voice meowed. "What is it?"

Emberflower flicked her tail in a signal to go, and Frostmask and the other mentors surged forward, wiggling beneath the bush, breaking or shoving parts of the den's walls away in their rush to get inside.

Lizardpaw was already standing, his back to Frostmask as the mentors broke into the den. Cricketpaw let out a high pitched *"eep!"* as Pineshade pounced on her. Yewpaw yowled in distress at the appearance of the shadowy figures, springing out of his nest. Frostmask swatted at Lizardpaw's tail, and he whirled towards her, his teeth bared in a snarl for just an instant before recognition dawned in his eyes. By that time, the entire den had been overrun with mentors, and the apprentices' shock and surprise waned as they realized there was no real threat.

"What's going on?" Featherpaw demanded, stumbling to her paws.

"Is something wrong?" Hollowpaw's wavering voice asked as she gazed around the den with wide eyes.

"Nothing's wrong," Emberflower reassured. "We were just testing your alertness. You all remember SkyClan's attack on our camp

earlier in leaf-bare. We always need to be prepared since enemies can show up at any time."

"Tonight is a special night of training," Pineshade added, her flicking tail betraying her eagerness. "You all must work together to succeed."

"What are we doing? Where are we going?" Cedarpaw asked, his pelt pricking in anticipation as he stepped out of his nest.

Dampfang lightly batted Cedarpaw's ears with a paw.

"Patience," he scolded. "We will explain in a moment."

Cedarpaw dipped his head obediently.

Emberflower nodded.

"Yes," she meowed. "Take a few moments to get yourselves ready, and then meet us outside of the thorn barrier. We will talk more then."

Emberflower nodded at the mentors, who turned and streamed back out of the den. The group swiftly headed out of the camp, where a small patrol of warriors consisting of just Autumnleap and Leafbreeze were sitting, waiting for them. Autumnleap sprung to his paws as soon as he saw Frostmask, greeting her with a warm purr. Frostmask purred in response, brushing her muzzle against his. He pulled back, sweeping a gaze over her mud plastered pelt.

"You look like the earth tried to swallow you whole," he commented.

"Well we have to be camouflaged somehow," Frostmask said, twitching her tail. "The apprentices are sharp."

Autumnleap's whiskers twitched.

"Ah, and how did scaring the tail off of them go?" he teased.

"Lizardpaw's tail is still fully intact," Frostmask retorted, fluffing her fur out indignantly. "And, he was actually already out of his nest

when we got in the den. I think he sensed something was off."

Autumnleap shrugged.

"I'm just saying that it feels a little mean," he said. "When it happened to us, we'd never seen a battle, but these apprentices have. You probably scared them out of their wits, thinking SkyClan came back!"

Frostmask's tail twitched guiltily. She hadn't really considered that.

"Well they need to be prepared," she mumbled. "SkyClan could come back."

Autumnleap's gaze softened, and he leaned forward to touch his muzzle to her forehead.

"I'm just teasing you," he said. "I'm sure you didn't permanently traumatize anyone."

Frostmask swatted at his tail in punishment for his teasing, but Autumnleap whisked it away from her paws, purring. The thorn barrier rustled then, and the apprentices came padding out. Lizardpaw glanced at Frostmask, his eyes bright and curious. Frostmask straightened and signed *'hello,'* to him, doing her best to look the part of a wise mentor.

"Good, you're all here," Emberflower meowed, turning to the apprentices.

She began to paw-sign as well as speak as she explained the instructions to the group.

"So, here's what's going to happen. In this exercise there will be two groups. A smaller patrol consisting of you apprentices and a few warriors. Then a larger patrol of warriors who are out there." Emberflower flicked her tail towards the trees to indicate the forest.

"This exercise will model a small, infiltrating patrol invading another Clan's territory to retrieve an item. So, everywhere outside of the camp in this scenario is enemy territory for you all. Your patrol's goal will be to reach the Burnt Sycamore. Somewhere by

that tree, you will find a large deer bone. You all are to retrieve that bone and bring it back to camp."

The apprentices nodded, their eyes lighting up with eagerness.

"However," Emberflower continued, her tail flicking mischievously. "There will be 'enemy' warriors in the woods, whose job it is to stop you all. If you are subdued by any of these warriors, you become a prisoner and must obey the warriors' commands. You remain a prisoner until another member of your patrol finds you and physically touches you. Then you are freed. Your patrol wins if you make it with the bone back to camp. However, you must return to camp with at least half of your patrol because a victory with devastating losses is hardly a victory at all. If the sun rises before you succeed in this task or if you all are taken prisoner, then the warriors' patrol wins."

Emberflower paused for breath, her gaze flicking over the apprentices.

"Any questions?" she asked.

Yewpaw raised his tail.

"Yes, Yewpaw?" Emberflower meowed.

"Can one of us bring the bone to camp and then go back to free the prisoners?" he asked.

"No," Emberflower said. "Once the bone is in camp, the game is over. So it must be brought to the camp with the appropriate number of cats in the patrol if you want to win."

Yewpaw nodded, his brow furrowing as if he already was thinking up a strategy.

"One more thing," Emberflower said. "Leafbreeze, Autumnleap, and I will be on the patrol with you all, but it will be your job to tell us what to do. This is an assessment of your skills, so we will not offer any advice or guidance."

"Think of us as your apprentices for the night," Autumnleap purred,

his tail twitching playfully.

"The rest of your mentors," Emberflower continued, nodding towards Rowanheart, Redclaw, Frostmask, Pineshade and Dampfang. "Will be in charge of leading the group of warriors."

Emberflower turned from the apprentices to look at the other mentors.

"Are we ready to begin?" she asked.

Redclaw nodded, rising to her paws.

"I think we are," she meowed.

"Perfect," Emberflower purred. "We will give you all a bit of a head-start, so you can reach the other warriors before the game begins."

"Good luck!" Frostmask spoke and signed to the apprentices, blinking affectionately at Lizardpaw as she went to join the opposing patrol.

"You're the one that's gonna need it," Autumnleap teased, narrowing his eyes at her.

"You wish, frog-brain!" Pineshade scoffed.

She flicked Autumnleap's ear with her tail as she strode past him to stand at Frostmask's side, raising her chin.

"You'll be the first I'll take prisoner," Pineshade taunted.

"I'd like to see you try," Autumnleap playfully threatened, baring his fangs.

Pineshade rumbled a growl back, her tail flicking eagerly.

"Children, don't forget this is an exercise for the apprentices." Redclaw's voice was firm as she scolded Pineshade and Autumnleap, but her expression was fond.

"You know that I can never pass up an opportunity to hand

Autumnleap his pelt," Pineshade responded, her gaze unwavering from Autumnleap's as the two of them sized each other up.

"Can you try to keep his pelt mostly in one piece?" Frostmask piped up. "I like it better that way."

Autumnleap's fierce stare shattered as he purred, and Pineshade's sharp amber gaze flickered from him to Frostmask.

"You can't be soft on Autumnleap tonight," she warned. "Until sun-up he's our enemy."

"I'm pleased to see that you and Autumnleap already getting so into the game," Emberflower said to Pineshade, her whiskers twitching in amusement. "But, you all should get going. We are wasting starlight."

"Well maybe that's all a part of our strategy," Rowanheart chimed in with a teasing purr. "We win when the sun rises right?"

Emberflower arched a brow at her son before looking at Redclaw.

"If your patrol doesn't leave in two heartbeats, I'll release the apprentice patrol immediately, and you won't get your head-start," she warned, but there was a purr in her voice.

"Alright, alright! We're going, keep your fur on," Redclaw purred, glancing at the cats in her patrol. "Sorry everyone, you'll have to finish practicing your smack-talk later."

"There'll be plenty of time when you're all my prisoners!" Pineshade shouted the final jab over her shoulder as their patrol began to pad off into the trees.

They picked up their pace to a brisk trot, the frozen ground crunching under their feet as they bounded through the dark woods. They hadn't run for too long though before Redclaw glanced over her shoulder at the rest of the group.

"We should split up," she meowed. "Rowanheart and I will head to the Burnt Sycamore to join the defensive group there. Frostmask, Pineshade, and Dampfang, why don't you three go find the offensive

group? They should be waiting by the mossy log near the edge of the marsh."

Everyone nodded in agreement, although Frostmask stiffened at the thought of being trapped with Dampfang, relying on Pineshade as their only buffer.

It won't be for long... Just until we get to the patrol. She tried to reassure herself.

The cats peeled off from each other. Frostmask slowed her pace slightly so she fell behind Dampfang and Pineshade.

No need to antagonize him by staying in front.

Pineshade seemed to also notice the precarious situation the three of them were in because she shot an uncertain look from Dampfang to Frostmask.

"I know that neither of you is each other's favorite cat in the forest," Pineshade said drily. "But, could I make a request that you two don't claw each other up? At least for tonight?"

Dampfang glanced back at Frostmask from over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing slightly. Frostmask couldn't stop the reflexive bristling of her pelt when their gazes met, although she tried to keep her expression neutral.

"Alright," Dampfang said. "We *are* on the same team tonight."

Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise at how easily he agreed, but she gave him a curt nod of agreement. Dampfang looked back forward, and the three of them continued through the forest in silence.

Frostmask's ears swiveled as the sound of trickling water caught her attention. They were approaching the stream. She knew not far away on the other bank was the mossy log that they were supposed to be meeting the rest of their patrol by.

Frostmask swallowed, her mouth going a bit dry at the thought of having to step into the water. She couldn't recall an easy way to cross the stream in this area. Fallen logs and stepping stones were

either up or downstream of them.

Frostmask set her jaw, hoping that Dampfang wouldn't notice the nervousness in her expression as they reached the edge of the stream. The stream was small and shallow here, although water was running slightly faster than normal due to the recent snow melt. The width of the stream was also only four, maybe five fox-lengths across. Frostmask's gaze brushed over the dark ripples, and she shuddered as her mind conjured up unhelpful thoughts about the vicious currents that may lurk just beneath the surface.

Dampfang and Pineshade didn't even hesitate. They walked through the stream with only a few unpleasant grimaces and grumbles as the cold water splashed on their leg fur. In a matter of moments, they were on the other side, shaking droplets from their pelts. Frostmask lingered on the opposite bank, her fur bristling slightly and her gaze still flitting over the water as she weighed her options.

She knew her fear of the water was irrational. Dampfang and Pineshade were just fine, and they were just standing in it an instant ago. But, as Frostmask stared at the water, it still felt like her paws were frozen to the ground, refusing to move her forward, towards it.

Pineshade and Dampfang glanced back at her as they realized she wasn't right behind them. Dampfang's gaze swept over Frostmask, and his green eyes seemed to light up.

"What's the matter, Frostmask?" he asked. "Afraid of getting your paws wet?"

Frostmask's half-bristling fur stood up straight. She locked her gaze on Dampfang, shooting him the best furious look she could manage. Dampfang blinked at her, unbothered. In fact, he appeared *positively* smug.

"I just don't want to freeze my toes off later," Frostmask growled, taking a jerky step back from the bank. "I'll look for another place to cross."

"We don't have enough time for that," Dampfang meowed

impatiently, flicking his tail. "We need to alert the patrol that the apprentices are coming."

"It'll only take a moment," Frostmask insisted, beginning to pad up the bank.

"If you're not quick enough we'll have to leave without you," Dampfang warned.

Frostmask growled softly to herself.

Pineshade had been watching this exchange in silence, her head snapping from Frostmask to Dampfang and then back as if they had been batting a ball of moss back and forth. But, as Frostmask began to walk away from them, Pineshade stepped forward hesitantly.

"Maybe Dampfang's right," she said. "My paws aren't too cold, Frostmask. You'll be fine."

Frostmask tensed, swallowing hard as she imagined the feeling of the hungry current tugging at her legs.

"No," she meowed hurriedly, glancing at Pineshade from over her shoulder. "I'm shorter than you, and my fur is longer. My belly will get all wet too."

"Why are you so scared of a little water?" Dampfang asked.

His tone made him sound genuinely puzzled, but as Frostmask glanced at him, she saw that his gaze still glinted with malicious amusement.

Because you almost drowned me, you snake-heart!

But, instead of saying anything, Frostmask just let out a vicious, wordless hiss.

Dampfang's brow furrowed as he frowned at her.

"Why are you being like this?" he asked. "Didn't we agree that we needed to work together tonight?"

Frostmask's jaw fell open in shock, her mouth moving but no words coming out at first.

"M-me?!" Frostmask sputtered. "I've done nothing! You're the one taunting me!"

Frostmask's gaze flickered to Pineshade, searching for support.

"Pineshade! Tell him!" she meowed.

Pineshade glanced from Frostmask to Dampfang uncertainly, but Dampfang continued before she could decide to say anything.

"Well, you're the one holding us all up because you don't want to get your fur cold," Dampfang rumbled. "That doesn't sound like someone who is interested in helping her team. If you can't get over yourself to work with me, maybe you should just go back to camp."

Anger rolling in her belly, Frostmask bared her fangs at him, stalking back down the bank to be closer.

"I know what you're doing you piece of snake-dung, and I'll—" Frostmask growled.

"You'll what?" Dampfang challenged, interrupting her. "Walk through that stream, come over here, and stop me?"

Frostmask froze. Dampfang stared at her, his eyes glowing with victory. Frostmask looked away from him, digging her claws into the muddy bank as her stomach twisted with hot shame and humiliation.

"That's what I thought," Dampfang sneered. "Come on Pineshade."

"I..." Pineshade said, still looking from Dampfang to Frostmask helplessly. "...We'll meet back up with you later, Frostmask."

Frostmask bit the inside of her cheek as she continued to stare at the ground, her muscles taunt with fury and embarrassment.

No. *I'm not getting run off by* ***stupid*** *Dampfang.*

Frostmask gaze flickered up, searching up and down the bank as she tried to figure out the closest place she could go to cross the stream. Her ears pricked with interest as a nearby sycamore caught her gaze. It was growing close to the bank, and one of its low branches stretched over the water, its tip reaching the other side.

Frostmask went bounding over to it, her pelt prickling. She sprung onto the trunk and climbed up to the low branch easily. She scrambled down the branch, fiercely telling herself to ignore the menacing water which was only a few fox-lengths below her, and at the end, she leapt down to the opposite bank without issue.

Clenching her jaw, she ran after Dampfang and Pineshade, catching up to them quickly. Dampfang's ears pricked as she approached, greeting her with a surprised glare from over his shoulder. Frostmask curled her lip up at him but didn't slow her pace. She brushed by Pineshade, who let out a mew of surprise, and ran ahead of them to the nearby mossy log and the dark silhouettes she could see waiting for them there.

One long-legged silhouette rose to their paws and walked over to greet them. Frostmask blinked hard as she drew closer and recognized Sedgestar.

He nodded at her in greeting.

"Hello Frostmask," he said.

"Sedgestar, I didn't realize you would be here," Frostmask meowed, coming to a stop by him.

His amber eyes twinkled in the low light.

"And, let my warriors have all of the fun?" he asked, his tail-twitching playfully. "What's the status?"

"The apprentice patrol should be on the move by now," Frostmask reported. "Redclaw and Rowanheart went to alert the defensive patrol."

"Good," Sedgestar said with a nod, before turning his head to greet Pineshade and Dampfang as they padded up to them.

The rest of their patrol padded over to them. Frostmask lifted her tail in greeting to Dustleap, Marshnose, and Murmurstep. Once everyone had gathered around, Sedgestar turned back to Frostmask, Pineshade and Dampfang.

"Alright," he meowed. "What's next?"

Frostmask blinked in confusion.

"Wait, you're not leading the patrol?" she asked.

"As I'm sure you all recall from the last battle, I will not always be there to direct every fight," Sedgestar said, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "I'd like to see how my warriors manage without me. And, since this is an exercise for your apprentices, I think the responsibility should default to you three."

Frostmask's brow furrowed thoughtfully.

Just us three? Is this another one of Sedgestar's secret plots to test our potentials as deputies?

Dampfang raised his chin.

"I won't let you down," he said solemnly. "Come on everyone, let's get into position."

Dampfang gestured for the patrol to follow him with a sweep of his tail before he turned back towards the woods. Pineshade was at his shoulder at the head of the patrol. Frostmask was happy to ditch their company, falling back to Murmurstep's side as they trotted through the woods. The pale golden she-cat greeted her with a warm purr, which Frostmask easily returned.

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you," Frostmask said, her voice hushed so she couldn't be overheard. "I thought I was going to be stuck with cats with tadpoles instead of brains all night."

Murmurstep winced in sympathy.

"Dampfang was being that bad, huh?" she asked, her ears angling back slightly.

"Unbearable," Frostmask hissed in a low voice. "And, Pineshade just trails after him like some sort of lost kit! Ugh, it's almost like she's not even the same cat when she's with him."

Murmurstep frowned in concern.

"What happened?" she asked.

Frostmask's tail flicked uneasily as their patrol arrived back at the bank of the stream, as if her just thinking about it summoned it. Luckily though, Dampfang and Pineshade, for whatever reason, had chosen to cross at a different area this time, and there were stepping stones here. Frostmask waited for her turn to cross, bounding over the slippery rocks before continuing her conversation with Murmurstep on the other side.

"We had to cross the stream to get the mossy log," she said, gesturing back at it with her tail. "And, I'm... I'm scared of water."

Frostmask's ears warmed with shame at the confession, and she realized that this was probably the first time she'd ever admitted that out loud to anyone. But, something about Murmurstep's attentive gaze and quiet disposition made her easy to talk to, and Murmurstep didn't scoff at her for the fear, instead she just nodded sympathetically.

"Because of when you almost drowned as an apprentice?" Murmurstep guessed.

"Yeah," Frostmask said, her tail flicking. "But, anyway so the part of the stream we ended up at had no easy way to cross. No fallen logs or stepping stones. Dampfang and Pineshade just walked through the water, but I wanted to go a little ways up or downstream so I didn't have to do that. And, Dampfang just begins *taunting* me for it. I don't know if he figured out my fear just then, or if he's known it for a while. But, he starts acting like I'm being the unreasonable one for holding the patrol up and starting an argument with him. When it was so clearly all *his* fault for starting it! Also, I obviously still made it across the stream easily, even without getting wet, so it's not like I slowed us down. Ugh, and the cat has some nerve too because he's the reason I'm scared of water. He's the one that

knocked me into the river when I was an apprentice!"

Murmurstep nodded along as Frostmask ranted, her brow furrowed.

"And, what was Pineshade doing during all this?" she asked.

"Nothing," Frostmask growled. "At the end Dampfang wanted to leave me there, and Pineshade just told me she would see me later."

Frostmask huffed and rolled her eyes.

"I think she doesn't say anything and goes along with him because she doesn't want him to be mad at her," Frostmask added.

"Normally you can't stop Pineshade from giving her opinion on something even if you tried," Murmurstep said in a quiet voice.

"Right?!" Frostmask said, her tail flicking. "That's exactly what I mean."

"Should we talk to her about it?" Murmurstep asked, gazing at Frostmask intently. "Sometime when Dampfang isn't around?"

Frostmask shrugged, sighing.

"Believe me; I've tried," she said. "But, she's hopeless when it comes to him."

"Maybe she doesn't realize the effect he has on her," Murmurstep pointed out. "We need to help her."

"How can you help someone who doesn't want to be helped?" Frostmask muttered bitterly.

Murmurstep's concerned expression deepened into distress, and Frostmask felt a prickle of guilt for making her upset.

"Well maybe if *both* of us—" Frostmask began to backtrack, but she clamped her jaws shut as Sedgestar dropped back to Frostmask's other side.

"Hello," he said to her in his deep voice.

"Er— hi," Frostmask meowed, giving her leader an awkward nod and silently hoping he hadn't overheard her gossiping.

Clearly realizing that Sedgestar wanted to talk only to Frostmask, Murmurstep dipped her head to Sedgestar and made a swift exit by lengthening her stride and pulling ahead of them. Sedgestar's amber gaze on Frostmask was unreadable as he flicked his ears towards the cats at the head of the patrol.

"You don't want to be leading the patrol with Dampfang and Pineshade?" he asked, slightly tilting his head to the side.

"Well, you must know that Dampfang and I don't get along that well," Frostmask said, her tail twitching. "I figured things would go more smoothly if I just let him lead for now instead of us arguing over what to do."

"Ah, so you are *letting* him lead. But, he did not *take* the leadership from you," Sedgestar said, his eyes glinting.

Frostmask flicked her tail.

"Is there a difference?" she asked.

"What do you think?" Sedgestar said locking his intense gaze on hers. "You said it in a way that made me think so."

Frostmask shrugged and glanced away from him.

"Of course I'd rather think that I'm letting him lead for now, instead of him having taken the choice away from me," she said, staring out into the dark forest. "But, besides, we are only getting into position to find the apprentice patrol. It's a simple enough task, but it'll make him feel accomplished and secure in his position as 'leader.' So, maybe he'll be less likely to feel challenged by me if I suggest something later, when it is important."

"So, it was a calculated decision, then," Sedgestar said. "You're picking your battles."

Frostmask glanced back over at Sedgestar, angling an ear at him.

"Why did you decide to have this conversation with me?" she challenged suddenly. "Is this an examination of the apprentices or of the mentors?"

Frostmask was surprised to see that Sedgestar's amber eyes suddenly shimmered with warmth. He inclined his head to her.

"Perhaps it's a bit of both," he admitted. "That's a very insightful observation, Frostmask."

"Not really. You're not nearly as sneaky as you think you are," Frostmask said, the words slipping out before she could really think about them.

Sedgestar's ears perked up, his eyes widening slightly with surprise. Frostmask immediately felt her stomach clench in anxiety, and she bowed her head to her leader in apology.

"Sir, I'm sorr—"

"No, it's alright," he said, interrupting her with a laugh.

Frostmask risked glancing up at him, and the tension drained from her shoulders as she saw that he was regarding her with curiosity and amusement.

"You don't have to apologize," Sedgestar continued, still purring. "Although I am a bit surprised at how boldly sardonic you've grown. A trait you picked up from Swoopstrike, I'm sure. I suppose I only have myself to blame there, for making him your mentor."

It's a boldness I gained both from aging and from losing respect for you.

Frostmask dipped her head to him again, so he couldn't read the thoughts in her eyes.

"I will try my best not to pass it on to Lizardpaw," she said drily.

Sedgestar leaned towards her confidentiality.

"With Snakeeyes as his mother, I fear it's already much too late for him," he purred.

Frostmask surprised herself by purring in response— it was one of the first genuine laughs Sedgestar had pulled from her since the night of the battle in ShadowClan's camp.

Silence lapsed over the patrol as they approached the area of the forest where the apprentice patrol may be prowling. Dampfang glanced back at the group.

"Split up in pairs or alone," he ordered. "Comb through the forest and capture as many apprentices as you can. We are to stop them from getting to the Burnt Sycamore, or if that fails, stop them from returning to camp."

Everyone already knows that frog-brain.

But, Frostmask bit her tongue against the words. Challenging Dampfang still didn't feel worth it. So instead, she just went over to Murmurstep, eager to claim her as her partner since she knew that Pineshade would surely want to be with Dampfang. The patrol split apart, stalking silently through the dark woods.

Frostmask's every sense was alert for movement in the forest as she and Murmurstep searched for any sign of the apprentice patrol. They walked for a while before Frostmask froze as she spotted a fresh looking paw-print in some mud. Frostmask crept over to sniff it. It was a bit tricky to decipher the scent, the cats had clearly disguised themselves, but Frostmask noticed a few dark auburn hairs by the paw-print that unmistakably belonged to Autumnleap.

A pleased purr rumbled in Frostmask's throat as she glanced up at Murmurstep.

"Let's hurry," she whispered. "They're close."

The two of them picked up their pace, loping through the dark pine forest. A shadow flashed ahead of them.

"There they are!" Frostmask hissed, doubling down her speed.

Three cats came into view— Autumnleap, Cedarpaw, and Yewpaw. They clearly realized that they were being pursued, but they didn't slow to meet Frostmask and Murmurstep in battle. It made sense.

The apprentice patrol couldn't take prisoners like Frostmask's group could, so they were better off avoiding fights if they were able. But, Frostmask also knew that if they could not lose her and Murmurstep, but also refused to face them, then Frostmask and Murmurstep could herd the three of them to reinforcements, liking resulting in all of them being captured.

It seemed that the group realized this as well because Frostmask could hear them whispering frantically amongst themselves, although Frostmask couldn't quite make out what they were saying. But, then Autumnleap and Cedarpaw were dropping back towards Frostmask and Murmurstep, letting Yewpaw get away and continue towards the Burnt Sycamore.

Autumnleap and Cedarpaw whirled around to face them, and Frostmask sprung at Autumnleap without slowing her stride.

She had enough forward momentum to knock him off of his paws despite his greater size. Although, in the back of her mind, she had the nagging thought that this meant that he could now easily grab and over-power her. They tumbled a few times as Cedarpaw and Murmurstep leapt towards each other.

Frostmask could hear Autumnleap purring as they grappled with each other. Frostmask managed to pin him to the ground, and she peered down at him.

"You're not taking this seriously," she meowed. "This is real battle training!"

Autumnleap's gaze sparkled mischievously.

"In that case..." Autumnleap said, his paws suddenly flashing up to tighten around her shoulders.

Frostmask yelped as he suddenly flipped his body around, Frostmask held tight in his grasp. She kicked out at him with her hind-paws to loosen his grip enough to slip away from him, and she retreated backwards a few tail-lengths to the base of a large pine tree. Behind Autumnleap, Frostmask saw Murmurstep and Cedarpaw were still locked in combat. Frostmask's ears pricked in

surprise. Cedarpaw had only been training for a couple of moons. She thought Murmurstep would be able to capture him quite easily, but he seemed to be holding his own against her. At least, for right now.

What in the Stars has Dampfang been teaching him?

But, Frostmask's attention snapped back to her own fight as Autumnleap lunged towards her. Frostmask danced away from him, bouncing off of the pine's roots and trunk to get enough leverage to spring clear over his head. Autumnleap whirled around to face her — now he was the one trapped against the base of the tree. He raised his brows in an impressed expression.

"How'd you learn those fancy dodges?" he asked.

"Surrender, and I'll teach you," Frostmask said, curling her lip back in something between a grin and a snarl.

Autumnleap flashed forward instead of responding. Frostmask sprung upwards, twisting and landing on his back. She dug her paws into his long fur, nipping at his scruff. Autumnleap immediately fell on his side, rolling to crush her beneath him, but she leapt off before he could, scrambling back out of his reach.

"Were you always this fast when we were apprentices?" Autumnleap huffed, shaking brown pine needles out of his fur as he got back to his paws.

Frostmask caught a flicker of movement behind Autumnleap out of the corner of her eye. It was Murmurstep slinking over towards him. Cedarpaw was gone; he must have either escaped or Murmurstep decided it would be better to let him go so that she and Frostmask could team up and capture at least one of them.

Frostmask was careful not to allow her gaze to drift over to Murmurstep and give her away.

I should keep Autumnleap talking until she is within striking distance.

"If you were as small as me, you'd understand that you can't afford to get caught," Frostmask meowed.

Autumnleap angled an ear at her.

"Well, I think that if you try really—" Autumnleap began.

What was sure to have been a clever remark was cut off as Murmurstep flashed towards him, knocking his hind-legs out from under him with a firm whack of her paw. Frostmask sprung onto Autumnleap's shoulders then and with Murmurstep throwing her weight onto his hips, they managed to pin him to the ground.

"Ah! We captured you!" Frostmask meowed victoriously.

Autumnleap huffed.

"Alright, fine! I'm your prisoner," he conceded from the ground. "Now get off me! I swear you two are stomping on my kidneys on purpose."

Frostmask released him with a purr, although Murmurstep gave him a final jab on the back with her paw, her gaze glinting deviously. Autumnleap grunted at the sharp poke, shooting Murmurstep a reproachful look.

"I already agreed that I'm your prisoner! Torturing me is just cruel," he complained.

He slowly pulled himself back to his feet.

"Alright, so now what are you two terrible, enemy warriors going to do with me?" he asked.

Frostmask and Murmurstep exchanged a look.

"Should we continue towards the Burnt Sycamore?" Frostmask asked. "Or wait for the apprentices to come back this way when they head to camp?"

"Or, we could meet up with the rest of the patrol," Murmurstep suggested. "If enough cats have been taken prisoner, they will have to free some of them before they can return back to camp. It would definitely be easier to make them come to us, if possible."

Frostmask nodded.

"Good idea," she meowed.

The three of them headed back towards the area where their patrol had split up, keeping an eye out for any more cats in the apprentices' patrol as they did so, while calling out to locate their own. As they walked, for all his earlier complaining, Autumnleap didn't seem that upset about being a prisoner. He trotted at Frostmask's side, their pelts brushing as he hummed cheerily to himself.

Frostmask nudged his shoulder with her muzzle.

"Try to seem a little more downtrodden," she teased. "Or, cats are going to think that you let me capture you on purpose!"

Autumnleap heaved a dramatic sigh, flattening his ears.

"Oh no! Woe is me! I'm being forced to spend more time with Frostmask!" he cried out into the dark woods to no-one in particular.

"Yeah, that's way more convincing," Murmurstep said drily, rolling her eyes.

After a bit more walking, they managed to run across Sedgestar, Dustleap, and Dampfang, who had captured Emberflower and Hollowpaw. Pineshade had run off in pursuit of Cricketpaw, and no one was sure where Marshnose was at the moment. Since they did not yet have enough cats from the apprentice patrol captured to win, the group agreed to wait to ambush them on their way back to camp. Hopefully the defensive patrol at the Burnt Sycamore would be able to capture one or two from the apprentice patrol, and then if their patrol could get one more, the apprentice patrol would be forced to come back to free their companions before returning to camp.

Their patrol spread out, hiding in the deep shadows near tree trunks to wait for the apprentices to return. Frostmask kept Autumnleap close to her, making it her job to ensure that he wouldn't be freed

by another member of his patrol.

The moments passed slowly as they crouched in silence, but then Frostmask's attention was pulled to a bright white pelt in the distance that cut through the darkness like a beacon. She tensed. It was Lizardpaw with Featherpaw and Cricketpaw, who had evidently escaped Pineshade. Lizardpaw had a long white object clenched in his jaws.

The deer bone.

The group of apprentices was heading right towards where their patrol was lying in wait. Their tread was careful and their ears and eyes alert, but they continued closer to them, not realizing the trap they were walking into.

Dampfang was the first to spring out of hiding with a yowl, lunging towards the apprentices. Immediately the three of them scattered, taking off in opposite directions.

"Forget the others! Focus on retrieving the bone!" Dampfang shouted to the rest of their patrol.

Lizardpaw rocketed past Frostmask's hiding place, and she shot out after him, gesturing for Autumnleap to follow her. Frostmask's paws thrummed against the ground as she sprinted after her apprentice. Normally, he'd be faster than her, but Lizardpaw had done more running around the forest tonight than she had, and he was also carrying the large bone, so Frostmask found herself gaining on him. She panted hard as she drew closer, managing to close the final tail-length of distance between them as he stumbled slightly over the uneven ground.

Letting out a yowl of victory, Frostmask sprung on Lizardpaw, tackling him and knocking the bone out of his jaws. As they tumbled to a stop, Lizardpaw quickly went limp, surrendering to her. After flashing a few paw-signs to confirm that he was her prisoner, Frostmask got off of him and hurried over to where he had dropped the deer bone.

She blinked hard at it, her brow furrowing as she studied it more

closely.

The bone was shaped oddly— it was kind of knobby instead of smooth, and was she imagining it, or did it smell a bit like pine sap...?

"You little—!" Frostmask gasped, whirling back towards Lizardpaw.

He stared at her with shimmering blue eyes, letting out a self-satisfied purr.

It wasn't the bone at all, but a pine branch that had been stripped of its bark to look pale and white.

'You tricked me!' Frostmask signed, her expression still offended, but her heart swelled with pride for her apprentice.

Lizardpaw nodded, licking his paw and smugly drawing his paw over his whiskers. Huffing and puffing, Autumnleap finally caught up to the two of them.

"You got Lizardpaw?" he asked. "And, the bone?"

Frostmask sighed heavily.

"It's a branch," she said, waving her paw at it.

Autumnleap burst into a purr.

"It worked!" he crowed, padding over to Lizardpaw to give him a congratulatory head-bump. "Fantastic job!"

Autumnleap turned back to Frostmask.

"It was all his idea, you know," he said, still purring.

Frostmask purred as well.

"I've never been more proud to be fooled," she meowed drily.

The sound of more paw-steps interrupted their conversation as Dampfang came running over to the three of them. His green eyes narrowed in confusion as his gaze flitted over Frostmask and

Lizardpaw.

"Where is the deer bone?" he demanded bluntly.

"Lizardpaw didn't have it," Frostmask explained, gesturing towards the branch again. "It was just a stick that they disguised as the bone to be a decoy. The other apprentices may have even already made it back to camp with the real bone."

Dampfang's eyes widened in surprise and anger.

"What!" he snapped, his fur bristling. "You didn't get the bone back?!"

Frostmask's brow furrowed at Dampfang's tone, and her tail began to twitch in annoyance.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Frostmask meowed. "Did anyone capture Featherpaw or Cricketpaw?"

"No! They managed to free Hollowpaw and ran off!" Dampfang hissed.

Frostmask shrugged.

"The apprentices probably won then," she meowed. "As long as Redclaw's patrol didn't capture two of them."

Dampfang started to pace, his tail lashing.

"Well, I would've never let them get away, if I had known that you couldn't handle a task as simple as this," Dampfang growled between his fangs.

Frostmask scowled at him, clenching her jaw as real anger started to bubble up to replace her annoyance.

It's not fair that he's blaming this all on me!

"Don't be ridiculous. How was I supposed to know it was a decoy? You didn't!" Frostmask accused.

"You—" Dampfang began before releasing a hissed breath through his fangs as if he was trying to keep his temper in check. "Of course *you* would completely screw things up!"

A quiet growl rumbled in Frostmask's throat.

"What's wrong with you?! They're our apprentices!" she snapped in exasperation. "Aren't you happy that we've trained them well enough that they've won?!"

Dampfang stalked closer to her, his tail lashing.

"No. I'm *not* happy that they've won because you've given them *no* challenge! By being such an *idiot* that you were tricked by a branch!" Dampfang snarled.

Frostmask fluffed her fur out in anger while Autumnleap rumbled a low, warning growl to Dampfang, prowling over to stand at Frostmask's side.

"Lay off her, Dampfang," Autumnleap said, his amber eyes smoldering in the darkness.

Dampfang turned to him, his lip curling back in an ugly snarl.

"This doesn't involve you, Autumnleap," Dampfang spat. "Back off."

"It does involve me if you speak to Frostmask that way," Autumnleap rumbled, taking a stride forward instead, bringing him and Dampfang almost nose-to-nose.

The two toms sized each other up, hard, corded muscles bunching beneath their coats. The tension between them crackled like lightning.

"Get out of my face," Dampfang snarled, jabbing a paw hard against Autumnleap's chest. "Go stand by that tree, *prisoner."*

"I'm no one's prisoner," Autumnleap snarled back, baring gleaming fangs. "And, certainly not *yours."*

Frostmask swallowed hard, her pelt still bristling, but now with fear

and worry rather than anger. Autumnleap and Dampfang looked like they were only moments away from clawing each other's pelts off. She took a step towards them, hoping to defuse the situation.

"We should all calm down," she said. "It's just a game."

Dampfang whirled on her.

"Just a game?!" he exploded, hissing. *"You stupid frog-brain!* We don't do these exercises because it's just a *game.* We do it because cats lives could depend on this training! Because *ShadowClan* depends on it! If you had a drop of loyalty in your body, you'd understand that!"

"I'm just as loyal to ShadowClan as you are," Frostmask spat back at him, planting her feet and stubbornly holding her ground.

She refused to shrink back from him, even as he pressed himself closer, looming threateningly over her. Dampfang's green eyes narrowed to furious slits, and he let out a wordless growl, his claws unsheathing. Now Frostmask did take a step back, her stomach flipping.

Would Dampfang really attack me?!

Frostmask felt the fur on her side stir as Lizardpaw suddenly appeared, stepping protectively between her and Dampfang. A look of surprise briefly flitted over Dampfang's expression as Lizardpaw locked cold and angry blue eyes on him. But, Dampfang's surprise was fleeting, and the expression was quickly replaced with an escalating look of fury.

"You think you scare me little kit?!" Dampfang snarled at Lizardpaw

Lizardpaw was as silent as always, only his blue eyes narrowing in response to Dampfang.

Frostmask wasn't sure if Lizardpaw could fully understand what Dampfang was saying to him. It was dark, and he was shouting—both things that make it more difficult for Lizardpaw to lip-read. But, Dampfang's body language was extremely clear.

"You useless, *waste* of space," Dampfang spat, his fur spiking out like a pinecone.

Hot anger rolled in Frostmask's belly and a growl rumbled in her throat, but Dampfang continued ranting before she could even move a whisker.

"Both of you!" he snarled, whipping his head towards her. "You harm ShadowClan more than help it! Sedgestar should've never let Lizardpaw train as an apprentice, just like he should've never let you into this Clan! You disgusting fur-balls are better off rotting—"

Dampfang's words cut off into a yowl as Autumnleap suddenly tackled him. The two went tumbling, hissing and spitting as clumps of fur flew.

Frostmask stomach lurched at the sight of droplets of blood clinging to the hairs. They were fighting with unsheathed claws. She sprung toward them.

"No! Autumnleap, stop!" she yowled.

She had to break them up. Although what Dampfang had been saying was horrible, all of their other clan-mates would see attacking a clan-mate as way worse.

Autumnleap ignored her, or maybe he just didn't hear her, given how loudly he and Dampfang were snarling at each other.

Frostmask's head whipped around as she heard yowls of alarm coming from the distance, and then the drumming of paw-steps as her clan-mates rushed over to the commotion, recognizing the sounds as a real fight rather than training. Frostmask turned back to the wrestling toms.

"Autumnleap!" Frostmask hissed pleadingly, hoping to get him off of Dampfang before their clan-mates arrived.

But, she had no such luck.

"Enough!" Sedgestar's voice thundered as he barreled over to the fighting cats, his amber eyes narrowed in outrage.

Pineshade had reappeared, and she was right behind him. Her eyes were round with shock at the sight of her mate and her brother trying to tear the other to shreds.

Autumnleap and Dampfang finally broke apart at the sound of Sedgestar's yowl. Both of them were panting as they backed away, still staring murderously at the other. New scratches adorned both of their pelts, and blood dripped down onto Autumnleap's forehead.

"Autumnleap, your ear!" Frostmask gasped as she rushed to his side.

Dampfang had torn off the tip of his right ear, leaving a deep V in it.

"I'm okay," Autumnleap muttered, although when Frostmask gently rasped her tongue over the wound, he winced.

"What happened here?" Sedgestar hissed through clenched fangs, his tail lashing.

The rest of their patrol had appeared to gather behind Sedgestar and stare at Autumnleap and Dampfang like silent, wide-eyed owls.

"Autumnleap attacked me!" Dampfang snarled.

Dampfang had a nick on his lip, and he spat bloody saliva onto the ground as Pineshade crept over to him to inspect his wounds. Sedgestar turned his glare on Autumnleap, his gaze furious.

"Is this true?" he demanded.

Autumnleap raised his chin.

"Yes, but Dampfang provoked—" Autumnleap began.

"Silence," Sedgestar hissed, cutting him off. "It doesn't matter what Dampfang said, this never should've come to blows. We are one Clan! We do not fight ourselves!"

Autumnleap's jaw fell open in shock, but Frostmask brushed her tail over his muzzle before he could say anything and possibly make Sedgestar more mad. She leaned in close to his ear.

"We can speak to Sedgestar later, privately," she said in a hissed whisper. "He'll be more willing to listen when he's less angry, and you'll have me and Lizardpaw backing your defense up."

Autumnleap reluctantly closed his mouth again, giving a small nod, although his brow was still knit in anger. Sedgestar spent a few more moments glaring at the cats in front of him in silence as if he was waiting for someone else to speak up and challenge him.

"Everyone back to camp," he growled finally. "Dampfang and Autumnleap, go see Clearstream and Elmclaw about your scratches and then come speak to me for your punishments. I hope you're pleased that we have to use our precious herb stock to treat your pointless cuts."

"Wait, you're not planning on punishing me, are you?!" Dampfang said, his eyes widening in indignation. "Even though Autumnleap was the one who attacked me?!"

Sedgestar rumbled a low growl, his head whipping towards Dampfang.

"I will discipline you both as I see fit," Sedgestar spat. "Now, get out of my sight before you make things worse for yourself."

His pelt still bristling, Sedgestar whirled around and stalked off into the forest.

New Moon Meetings

Frostmask stalked through the quiet, inky-black forest. Her paw-steps were muffled by the thick layer of pine needles on the forest floor, and she was almost relieved to feel slimy mud between her toes, oozing out between the bed of needles.

It was finally creeping closer to new-leaf, and a thaw had touched every pawstep of ShadowClan territory. Although it was clear they weren't totally out of leaf-bare's grasp yet— the nights were still cold, and prey was still scarce— ShadowClan had finally allowed themselves to dream of warm pools of sunshine, overfilling fresh-kill piles, and stuffed bellies. As every passing day brought them a step closer to new-leaf, each sunrise also seemed to brighten eyes and lift tails a bit higher.

It wouldn't be long now. Frostmask assured herself.

But, new-leaf would bring its own kind of troubles. Although the forest had been quiet for the past couple of moons as the clans focused their energy on catching enough food to eat rather than squabbling over borders or old feuds, once prey was running well enough that their basic needs were taken care of, Clans would surely turn their attention back to their wars. There was no way around it— the cycle was as regular and reliable as the seasons themselves.

At least the tensions within ShadowClan should cool once cats are less hungry, and when we can focus on a common enemy again. Frostmask mused.

Ever since Dampfang's and Autumnleap's fight a little over a quarter moon ago, all of her clan-mates seemed on edge. Frostmask felt like she'd been walking on eggshells in camp, trying not set any cat off.

Despite Frostmask, Autumnleap, and Lizardpaw trying to explain the situation that led to the fight to Sedgestar, he was unwavering in his decision to disciplined both Autumnleap and Dampfang.

"I don't care who started the argument. I can't have my warriors drawing blood from each other," he'd said. "Dampfang wasn't in the right, but neither were you, Autumnleap. Which is why you both will serve out the same punishment."

Sedgestar had demoted Dampfang and Autumnleap to apprentice status for a half-moon. They had to preform chores around the camp, couldn't go out into the forest without getting explicit permission from Sedgestar or Grovepelt, and they even had to sleep in the apprentices' den.

Although Autumnleap certainly wasn't pleased about the punishment, Frostmask took a little comfort in the fact that Dampfang, normally so prideful and arrogant, would certainly find it more humiliating than Autumnleap would. Even more embarrassing for Dampfang, Sedgestar had temporarily stripped him of his mentorship, reassigning Cedarpaw to Murmurstep for the duration of Dampfang's demotion.

Frostmask was sure that Dampfang must be just about ready to murder Autumnleap for the embarrassment he'd put him through, but Dampfang had shown a surprising amount of self-control for the past few sunrises. He and Autumnleap hadn't gotten into another fight, despite the fact that they were in such close quarters, sleeping under the same small holly bush.

Surprisingly, Pineshade actually was being more of a thorn in Frostmask's side about it than Dampfang was. She'd adopted Sedgestar's line about both of the toms being at fault, which Frostmask supposed was better than her fully blaming Autumnleap, but it still nettled her like a burr in her pelt when Pineshade seemed irritable at Autumnleap about the fight.

*Would she think differently if she had been there to hear what Dampfang had been saying with her own ears? ...She'd **have** to.*

Frostmask gave her head a small shake, trying to put the thoughts about her den-mates out of her mind. She missed the brush of Autumnleap's fur against hers when she went to sleep, but at least him being in a different den made it easier for her to slip out of camp tonight without him waking and asking where she was

going... since there was no way she could tell him that she was on her way to Fourtrees, going to meet Paledusk again.

Since the last gathering was canceled due to bad weather, it would be the first time she'd seen him since the last new moon. She had been a bit worried if Paledusk would even remember that he had suggested that they meet again at this new moon, but she brushed her doubts aside. Paledusk didn't seem the type of cat who'd so easily forget his obligations.

Her hunch was confirmed as she crossed the thunderpath and crept up to the lip of the slope that led down to Fourtrees. In the deep shadows of one of the towering oaks, a white cat was crouched.

Frostmask's paws tingled in anticipation.

Last time, we barely had the chance to talk about May. But, this time, I'll make sure he answers my questions.

Frostmask dashed down the hill towards the hollow, only doing a cursory glance around this time to make sure Paledusk was really alone before padding out of the bushes and walking towards him.

Frostmask noticed that Paledusk had positioned himself near one of the large oak trees rather than in the center of the clearing as he had previously. He was sitting with his back to the trunk, as if to stop Frostmask from sneaking up on him as she'd done before.

Frostmask's whiskers twitched in a flash of amusement.

Maybe I should have climbed the tree from the other side and then pounced down at him. Wouldn't that have given him a scare?

As she padded up to Paledusk, he rose to his paws, a welcoming purr in his throat.

"Frostmask, it's good to see you," he said, dipping his head towards her.

Frostmask nodded awkwardly back at him.

She didn't want to say that it was good to see him too, since she

wasn't quite sure if it was— honestly she was still trying to sort out all of her confusing, conflicting feelings towards him. It was hard to reconcile the charming cat who wanted to get to know her, with the cold cat who'd deliberately frightened her as an apprentice, and the aggressive cat who'd killed Swoopstrike. Paledusk could be quite the enigma.

"...Hello," she said, deciding to settle for the neutral, unoffensive greeting.

If Paledusk was bothered by her awkward, hesitant response, he didn't show it. Instead, his gaze just scanned over Frostmask, taking in her skinny form.

"I hope the warming weather is bringing prey back to ShadowClan territory. You look like your pelt is barely clinging to you," he said, blinking at her.

Frostmask's fur prickled. In truth, she and her clan-mates were thinner now than they were a few moons ago— the cold weather and poisoning at the Carrionplace had seen to that. But, she didn't like the idea of Paledusk thinking that she or ShadowClan were weak because of it.

"It's not that bad," Frostmask meowed, giving her fur a shake to add the illusion bulk to her body. "Prey has started running much better, and we all have full bellies now."

Paledusk just nodded, still studying her. Frostmask's gaze flicked over Paledusk, and she noticed that although he had a leaf-bare leanness to him, he was not nearly as thin as she was.

"It looks like prey has returned to SkyClan as well," she commented, nodding at him, eager to turn the conversation away from ShadowClan.

Paledusk's whiskers twitched faintly.

"Our expanded territory has been treating us well," he said. "And, even if we can't find prey in the forest, there's always food in the two-leg place. If you know where to look."

Frostmask stiffened in surprise, her eyes widening.

"SkyClan goes into the two-leg place to find food?" she asked.

Paledusk shrugged.

"If we need to," he meowed.

Frostmask must have still looked shocked at this revelation because his brow furrowed as he gazed at her.

"It's no big secret. Obviously it's not as ideal as hunting prey in the woods, but do you think we should just let cats die of starvation instead of taking advantage of a resource that's right under our noses?" he asked. "ShadowClan has a carrionplace in your territory, correct? If you needed, wouldn't your Clan search for food there?"

"Well... yeah, I suppose so," Frostmask said, blinking as she processed it. "But, the Carrionplace is dangerous because of the rats that live there. Isn't the two-leg place dangerous too? Like because of the two-legs and dogs?"

Paledusk snorted, taking a seat and swiping a paw across his face to smooth his whiskers.

"Two-legs are stupid," he said. "They're slow, easy to escape from, and their senses are dull. Dogs are more of a concern, but they can't climb and are often at the mercy of the two-legs. As long as you keep your wits about you, it's plenty safe."

"What about other cats?" she asked.

Paledusk purred briefly, the amusement making his face look younger and more friendly, but an almost dangerous glint still flashed in his green eyes.

"We haven't had a problem with other cats in seasons. The band of rogues that used to sniff at our borders is long gone. The most fearsome cats that live there now are soft kittypets who've never hunted or fought a day in their lives," Paledusk said.

"But, is the food you find there safe?" Frostmask insisted, her mind

drifting to the poisoned rats in the Carrionplace. "The two-legs don't... do things to it?"

Paledusk blinked once before tilting his head to the side in a gesture that Frostmask was beginning to associate with him. He gazed at her with interest.

"Are you talking about two-legs poisoning fresh-kill? ...How would a ShadowClan cat know anything about that?" he mused.

Frostmask's fur prickled as the confusion in Paledusk's gaze cleared.

"Ah, the Carrionplace. Has something happened there?"

Frostmask clenched her jaw, kicking herself mentally for mentioning anything. She didn't want Paledusk to know about ShadowClan's poisoned prey problem! But, she hadn't anticipated that he'd be able to so easily see through what she'd thought was a vague and innocuous question.

She swallowed hard. She'd be skinned alive by her clan-mates if it ever got back to them that SkyClan had found out about the poisoned prey from her.

I have to fix this.

"No," Frostmask lied boldly. "But, the elders tell stories. About something that happened seasons ago, when the two-legs poisoned the rats that lived there and cats got sick when they ate them. It's part of the reason why we try to avoid hunting rats in the Carrionplace now."

Paledusk nodded, and Frostmask's pelt prickled with relief that he seemed to accept her explanation without issue.

"Well, your elders are very clever to warn you," he said. "Two-legs do sometimes poison prey in the two-leg place. But, the poisoned prey are easy to avoid if you understand what signs indicate a poisoned animal instead of a healthy one."

Frostmask blinked.

What signs?!

She was dying to ask the question, but she knew she couldn't. Showing so much interest in the poison might make Paledusk realize she was lying to him. Frostmask just nodded instead.

Maybe if I can get him talking about some of the times he's gone into the two-leg place, he'll mention it without me having to bring it up?

She paused for a moment to arrange her words carefully. She would make sure to not let anything slip this time.

"This talk about the two-leg place has me curious about what it's like..." Frostmask began slowly. "Can you tell me more about it? And, about May? Did you first meet her there?"

A low purr thrummed in Paledusk's throat. He settled down from a sit to a more comfortable crouch, curling his tail around himself. Frostmask sat as well, waiting for him to begin.

"I did meet her there," he said. "Although I actually wasn't the first to... That pleasure went to Slatewhisker. He ran into her one day while he was on an expedition into the two-leg place. They became friends, and later he insisted I go with him to see her. He told me what a remarkable cat she was." Paledusk's ears angled back slightly. "I'll admit... at first I was hesitant. I didn't understand why Slatewhisker was so impressed and taken with someone who wasn't in SkyClan. Not until I met her too. Then I couldn't stay away."

Frostmask gazed at Paledusk.

"What was she like?" she asked in a soft voice.

Paledusk stared out into the forest, his eyes unfocusing.

"She was the most beautiful cat I'd ever seen," he said. "She was curious and brave. She'd traveled all over the two-leg place and through unknown territories beyond by the time we met. The stories she could tell you of all the strange things she'd seen and experienced..."

Despite the underlying current of wariness Frostmask always felt

around Paledusk, she couldn't help but being completely enraptured as he talked about May. She was hanging off every word, carefully clinging to each piece of information, and tucking them into her heart for her to keep forever. She used them to enhance her fragmented image of her mother, filling in gaps and holes, adding splashes of crisp color to what was once out of focus and shadowed.

"What else?" Frostmask asked.

Paledusk glanced over at her. "She had an easy charm and wit, which she used to make friends wherever she traveled. But, she never stayed in any one place for too long. Her spirit was restless. She always wanted to wander... as untamed and free as the wind."

Paledusk's voice trailed off, and he gave his head a small shake as if he was dislodging the memories like rain from his pelt.

"I'm sorry. I just realized how rude I've been behaving," he meowed, glancing over at her. "I've just been talking about myself and my old memories this whole time instead of asking how you've been doing."

Frostmask's ears angled back, upset at the abrupt change in conversation.

But, I don't want to talk about me. I want to learn more about him and May! He barely told me anything about the time he spent with May or in the two-leg place, and he didn't even mention the poison at all...

"It's not rude," Frostmask protested. "I like hearing you talk about May and the time you spent with her. I want to know more."

Paledusk looked away from her, his gaze growing foggy as he gazed out into the dark forest.

"It's difficult for me to talk about," he muttered. "Although my memories of them are fond, they're also painful to relive now that Slatewhisker and May are gone."

Frostmask shuffled her paws, feeling a prickle of guilt now at her annoyance at him. She was definitely familiar with the ache of grief. Maybe it was unfair of her to press too hard.

"I understand," she said.

"I'll tell you more another time," Paledusk promised. "But, how have you been this past moon?"

Frostmask bent her head to rasp her tongue over her chest to bide time as she thought of an answer that'd satisfy Paledusk without disclosing anything too sensitive about ShadowClan. She'd have to avoid any talk about the rat poisoning or the greencough, of course. Neither could she afford to mention Dampfang's fight and make Paledusk think that ShadowClan was torn with strife. But, what was left for her to talk about then? That she spent the whole moon cold and hungry?

I could tell him about my relationship with Autumnleap.

But, her ears warmed as soon as she had the thought. That still felt too private to share with Paledusk.

Frostmask blinked, an idea striking her.

"I made up with Redclaw this past moon," Frostmask said, glancing back up at Paledusk.

His brow furrowed. "...Redclaw?"

"She's one of the queens who helped raise me after May died," Frostmask explained. "She was the only one of them who knew the truth about... well about you. That my father was a SkyClan cat. I'd been upset about her for a while for keeping the secret from me. But, we finally made up."

Paledusk nodded, giving a brief purr.

"Ah, I see. Well, I'm happy for you both."

He paused for a moment, opening his mouth as if to say more. But, then his brow furrowed, and with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, he closed his jaws again. Frostmask frowned as she gazed at him, her pelt prickling slightly at the odd reaction.

"What is it?" she asked.

Paledusk gave his head another small shake.

"Nothing," he said. "...It's not my place to say."

Frostmask blinked hard a few times, and her tail started to flip with annoyance. Paledusk had never seemed hesitant about sharing his opinion on something before, why'd he start now?

Does he know something I don't about Redclaw?

"No, tell me," Frostmask insisted, gazing at his face intently.

Paledusk met her eye, his gaze firm.

"I should just be pleased that you've made peace with the queen," he said. "As long as you're content, that's what matters."

Paledusk glanced away from her and started grooming a patch of fur on his side. As Frostmask gazed at him, a soft, disgruntled growl began to build in her throat.

Despite Paledusk's facade of nonchalance, it was painfully obvious that he was still holding back.

Does he think I'm some sort of stupid kit, and I won't realize what he's doing?

"But...?" Frostmask needled him.

Paledusk gave a sharp sigh, his eyes closing for a heartbeat.

"You're just like your mother. That she-cat was as stubborn as a badger," he said.

Frostmask mentally added that piece of new information to her collection, but she didn't let it distract her from the current conversation.

"...You're deflecting," Frostmask grumbled.

Paledusk opened his eyes and gave another sigh, this one decidedly more impatient than the last.

"Very well then," he said bluntly as he stared at her. "The truth is, I'm just worried about you."

Frostmask blinked hard a few times, confusion flooding her at his declaration.

"Worried? But, why?"

Paledusk stared at her in silence for a moment, his gaze reluctant, but he still answered her.

"I just don't want them taking advantage of you," he said.

"Them?" Frostmask echoed, her ears twisting back. "Who? Redclaw?"

His tail twitched.

"And, the others," he said. "Have they truly made up for what they've done? The secret, their mistrust in you?"

His eyes were intent as he stared at her, and Frostmask found herself unable to hold his gaze. Instead, she glanced over at the trees, shuffling her paws.

"Well... Redclaw isn't like that," Frostmask muttered. "Isn't like Sedgestar, I mean. She didn't betray me. She says that she always believed in me."

"But, she still didn't tell you the truth. She forced you to live a lie, waiting for you to find out for yourself," Paledusk said in a low voice.

"But, she was just following Sedgestar's orders," Frostmask argued back, looking back up at him.

He blinked at her, and his sharp, intense gaze once more reminded her of a snowy owl's.

"What did you mean by 'Redclaw didn't betray you like Sedgestar did?'" Paledusk asked suddenly.

Frostmask's eyes widened as her stomach dropped down to her paws.

She hadn't even noticed she'd said that.

Her muscles tensing, she silently cursed herself for the slip-up.

She tried so hard to watch her tongue, but keeping track of everything Paledusk, or even each of her clan-mates, did or didn't know was *so* difficult! Her head was a jumble of secrets, full of thoughts that certain cats could catch glimpses of, but only Frostmask, and she alone, was allowed to see the full picture.

I guess, it could've been worse at least...

Paledusk would have surely picked up on some of the animosity she felt towards Sedgestar by now— he was too clever and she wasn't good enough at hiding her feelings for him to have *not* noticed anything. And, what she said didn't reveal any of ShadowClan's weaknesses or secrets... just a humiliating event that proved that even Frostmask's own leader didn't see her as a 'real' member of ShadowClan.

Frostmask gave her head a small shake, pulling herself out of her thoughts. She sighed softly to herself, turning her face away from Paledusk again.

"Sedgestar was the one that forbade any of the clan-mates to tell me about my father being a SkyClan cat. He said that he didn't want my loyalties divided," Frostmask mumbled to the ground.

"Hm. I see," Paledusk said, his even mew giving away none of his thoughts. "And, do you think he was right to fear that? Do you feel like your loyalties are divided now?"

"No!" Frostmask protested, her gaze flying back over to Paledusk's.

She hesitated when their eyes met.

"I mean... no offense."

A loud purr rumbled in Paledusk's throat, and his angular features

softened in amusement once more.

"None taken," Paledusk said, dipping his head to her slightly. "I meant what I said before about admiring your loyalty to your clan. I am a SkyClan cat, and you are ShadowClan. I don't think either of us want to change that, and just because we share blood doesn't mean that we need to be in the same Clan."

Frostmask nodded.

"I just wish my clan-mates could understand that as easily," she muttered.

Paledusk frowned.

"Yes... It must be difficult for you," he said.

Frostmask just clenched her jaw and didn't respond.

"Something that I'm curious about though..." Paledusk continued. "If Sedgestar kept the secret under such tight wraps for so many moons, what made him finally tell you about it?"

Frostmask swallowed hard. She'd known this question was coming.

"Well... after SkyClan's raid on ShadowClan's camp, we found out that SkyClan had used the tunnels under the thunderpath to invade. Sedgestar assumed someone must have told them about the tunnels, and he accused me. I didn't know anything about it of course. When I asked him why he'd singled me out, he finally caved and told me that my father was a SkyClan cat."

Paledusk blinked hard a few times.

"But, neither of us had any knowledge of each other at that time," he said.

"I know," Frostmask growled softly, her claws curling out. "He still accused me anyway."

Paledusk gave a sympathetic sigh, shaking his head.

"He went through all that work to keep the secret from you to 'not divide your loyalties,' only to be distrustful of you anyway. How awful," he said. "It makes one wonder if he ever intended to trust you at all."

"I know," Frostmask muttered again, scowling down at the ground.

"I can only assume things have gotten worse now? Now that he knows you know?" Paledusk asked.

Frostmask shifted her weight from one paw to another.

"Well, I think he feels bad about it." Her eyes narrowed. "Or, he *acts* like he feels bad at least. But, I'm not sure if he will ever truly trust me... Or, if I can ever fully trust him again."

For several moments, neither of them spoke and silence grew between them like heavy fog had descended over them.

"It was prey blood, by the way," Paledusk meowed suddenly.

Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise, and she glanced up at him.

"What? What was?" she asked.

"What gave you all away," Paledusk explained, blinking at her. "A trail of prey blood. We hadn't seen any invading cats, but there was a trickle of blood leading from our territory into ThunderClan's. At first we thought it was the ThunderClanners doing the stealing, naturally. You all almost drove us to attack them." His whiskers twitched in amusement at the thought. "But, we decided to keep following the trail, and we managed to find the tunnel's entrance. I was certain it'd lead us into WindClan territory— they always seemed more rabbit than cat to me anyway. But, imagine our surprise when we popped out in ShadowClan's pines."

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she gazed at him, absorbing the information.

"Why'd you tell me all this?" she asked, feeling a sudden flash of suspicion.

Paledusk blinked once as if he didn't quite understand.

"I thought you'd like to know," he said. "I thought it could help you. Perhaps there is a way that you can convey it to Sedgestar to restore some of his faith in you."

Frostmask's tail twitched, not totally sold on his explanation, but she could see no gain Paledusk could get from lying about it.

But still, it seemed foolish of him to tell her. Didn't the fact that SkyClan hadn't been able to detect ShadowClan's presence reveal a weakness of theirs? Although, perhaps now that SkyClan was aware of how discreet ShadowClan could be, they would be more careful when searching for their presence?

"But, aren't you afraid that you're revealing too much to me?" Frostmask asked, her brow still furrowed.

"'Revealing too much?'" Paledusk echoed with an incredulous huff of amusement. "Do you realize how *ShadowClan* you sound right now? Not all cats horde secrets like your Clan does. All I told you was that SkyClan followed a trail of blood to the tunnel. Not the best way to break into SkyClan's camp and assassinate Fennelstar."

Frostmask's ears went a bit warm with embarrassment at his teasing.

"I'm just trying to understand," she protested. "Another thing I don't get is why your Clan didn't mention the tunnel at the last gathering. You all could've announced its existence in front of all the Clans, and taken that advantage away from ShadowClan, but you didn't."

Paledusk's eyes glinted with mischief.

"And, make things easier for ThunderClan?!" he asked, purring. "SkyClan doesn't mind ShadowClan causing trouble, just as long as you all don't do it on our territory."

Frostmask rumbled a brief purr in response, but it trailed off quickly as she found herself getting caught up in her thoughts again.

Paledusk's reasoning made some sense... although it wasn't

something she would've guessed herself. To Frostmask, it seemed like taking ShadowClan's advantage away from them would be more important than hoping that ShadowClan used the tunnel against ThunderClan at some point. If SkyClan revealed the tunnel, it maybe could even drive a wedge between Morningstar and Sedgestar. There was no way the ThunderClan leader would be pleased that ShadowClan had a secret way to get onto their territory...

Maybe there's another reason that SkyClan doesn't want to reveal the tunnel, which I just haven't figured out yet?

Or, maybe I'm looking too much into it, and Paledusk is telling the truth. He did say that SkyClan doesn't horde secrets like ShadowClan.

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake.

That seemed hard for her to believe too, but maybe it was true. So far just this night, Paledusk had told her about how SkyClan hunts in the two-leg place, how they knew ShadowClan had been on their territory, and SkyClan's reasoning behind keeping the tunnel a secret— with two of those three pieces of information being totally unprompted by her. If Frostmask and Paledusk had reversed roles, Frostmask doubted she would've shared *any* of those things. But, Frostmask was certain Paledusk wasn't stupid, so he had known what he was doing when he told her... Which meant the only reasonable explanation was just what he said— he didn't find sharing them a big deal.

Frostmask suddenly felt grateful for the fact that she'd decided to speak with Paledusk, despite all of the reservations she still felt towards him. The information he provided her was valuable. Not only was it helping her understand her mother better, but it also gave her a better understanding of how the other Clans thought.

Paledusk stood up and pitched forward, his back arching as he reached his paws out far in front of him in a deep stretch before he straightened again.

"I'm sorry to cut this meeting short, but I'll be needing to get back to camp soon," he said, shaking out his silky coat.

He arched a brow at Frostmask, his expression becoming unamused.

"I've got a very *riveting* dawn patrol to be on soon." Paledusk rolled his eyes. "And, I should catch a bit of rest before my clan-mates are asking me why I'm dead on my paws."

A brief purr rumbled in Frostmask's throat, and Paledusk's annoyed expression melted as his whiskers twitched in amusement. He dipped his head to her.

"Be careful heading back to your camp, would you? I wouldn't want you getting in more trouble with your clan-mates because of me."

Frostmask bristled slightly, but it was hard for her to tell if her annoyance was because she didn't like the idea of Paledusk telling her what to do, even if it was mild comment of concern, or if her anger was misplaced guilt from the fact that she knew her Clan would not like her meeting with Paledusk.

But, I'm not doing any harm. She argued with herself.

"I can take care of myself," she responded, trying to keep the defensiveness from her voice.

Paledusk blinked, unruffled.

"Of course," he said.

Frostmask just nodded before hesitating and gazing at Paledusk expectantly, waiting for him to suggest their next meeting.

But, Paledusk didn't say anything else. With a tail-flick of goodbye, he turned in the direction of SkyClan territory, starting to pad off. Frostmask took a step towards him before he could leave the hollow.

"Next new moon?" she asked.

Paledusk paused, glancing back at her from over his shoulder.

"I'll be there," he purred.

Passing of the Seasons

Frostmask perched on a low branch of a sycamore tree as she gazed out at the piles of two-leg junk that filled the Carrionplace.

Ever since her conversation with Paledusk a half moon ago, she'd taken to coming out here in her occasional free time to spy on the rats, determined to figure out the signs that indicated a poisoned animal. But, the process had been slow going. The poisoning seemed to have taken its toll on the rat population, and with low numbers came infrequent sightings. On top of that, most rats tended to stay in the depths of the Carrionplace, and there was no way Frostmask was going in there after them... But, that meant there'd been days where she hadn't even caught *one* glimpse of their naked, snake-like tails.

Frostmask set her jaw.

But, I'll find one eventually.

Having no luck from her view from the sycamore, Frostmask hopped down to the ground and began to prowl around the silver webbing which marked the border of the Carrionplace, sticking close to the shadows beneath the trees.

I'll just look around quickly then had back to camp if there's nothing there.

She glanced up towards the sun. It was hovering near the treetops, and opposite of it, a large full moon hung in the slowly darkening eastern horizon. There wasn't a cloud in the sky today; the gathering should happen without issue.

As long as we get back to camp in time for the gathering patrol.

Frostmask picked up her pace into a trot.

She followed the edge for a while, but as she rounded the last corner of the Carrionplace, she froze as the scent of blood drifted into her nose. After a heartbeat, she identified it as rat blood, and she continued forward again, although now she placed her paws down silently. Following the scent down the silver webbing, her eyes flashed to a lump of brown fur lying near the edge of the Carrionplace.

Frostmask froze in place and stared at the rat, waiting to see if it noticed her. But, the rodent was still. Its flanks didn't move with breath— there no sign of life in its body at all.

Frostmask approached it slowly, stopping right in front of the silver webbing. The rat's body was only about a tail-length away from her, on the other side of the large barrier. Blood stained the rat's muzzle, collecting around its nose and mouth. Unbidden, an image of Hootflight hacking up blood as he died from the poisoning appeared in Frostmask's mind.

Giving her head a sharp shake, Frostmask pushed the thought away, forcing herself focus back on the rat. She sniffed the air. There was no putrid scent of decay.

It must have died recently.

The beads of crimson blood on its face glistened in the fading light. Even that looked fresh.

Frostmask reached a paw through one of the holes in the silver webbing, trying to grab the rat's side with her claws, but even when she stretched her arm to its limit, the animal remained just out of her reach.

"Snake-dung," Frostmask cursed under her breath as she retracted her paw.

Dried leaves and grass suddenly crunched behind her. Frostmask spun around in fear, half-expecting to see another rat, but she relaxed immediately as Lizardpaw's white-furred form emerged from the gloom under the sycamores.

He blinked *'hello'* at her, two mice dangling from his jaws.

'Hey Lizardpaw. Where's Autumnleap?' Frostmask asked.

Some guilt prickled at her that she'd sent him hunting alone with Lizardpaw down the WindClan border, just so she could sit in a tree, watching rats. But, Autumnleap had insisted that he didn't mind. He'd said that he was just happy to be doing warrior things again now that his apprentice-duties punishment was over, and Frostmask's idea about the poisoned prey was important to investigate.

At least he's being supportive...

Frostmask had brought the suggestion up to a few cats, with mixed results. She'd asked Sedgestar and Grovepelt about it first, both of whom thought the risk of being poisoned or attracting the ire of the rats was greater than the chance of her finding out anything of value. That would've been enough to turn Frostmask off from the idea, if it wasn't for that she knew for certain from Paledusk that there was *some* sort of sign which could be useful for telling poisoned prey from non-poisoned ones... She just had to figure out what it was. Besides, Clearstream and Elmclaw at least seemed confident that the poison shouldn't harm any creature, unless they ingested it, which gave Frostmask a bit more confidence.

Lizardpaw just gestured vaguely to the forest behind himself in answer to her question, indicating that Autumnleap was coming. His gaze then flickered from Frostmask and to the rat behind her, his blue eyes widening.

'You found one,' he signed.

Frostmask nodded, glancing back over at the body. She couldn't see any other rats nearby, but she was determined to get to this rat before they did.

She turned back to Lizardpaw.

'I'm going to climb the webbing to get it. Keep an eye out for other rats, alright?' she signed.

Nervousness flashed in Lizardpaw's gaze, but he nodded. Frostmask turned towards the silver webbing, putting a hesitant paw in one of the holes and testing her weight on it. Despite the webbing being such a thin material, it was strong, and it didn't flex at all under her foot. She began to scramble up it, reaching the top in only a few moments.

It's almost easier than climbing a tree!

She climbed down the other side and sprung to the ground near the rat. Frostmask hesitated before touching it, peering closer at the animal.

Empty, glassy dark eyes stared back up at her. Its mouth was parted slightly, so Frostmask could see large, sharp front teeth sticking out from between its lips. With a cautious paw, Frostmask touched its side. The rat was still mostly limp, but some stiffness from death had begun to set in. She flipped the body over, searching its opposite flank for wounds. There were none, confirming her hunch that rat's blood had come from its mouth and nose.

A rush of anticipation ran through her.

*It **must** have died from poison.*

"What are you doing?!" a voice hissed.

Frostmask glanced up to see Autumnleap standing next to Lizardpaw on the other side of the silver webbing, his pelt prickling with worry and his amber eyes wide as he stared at her.

"I didn't know you'd be going *inside* the Carrionplace!" he said in a rough whisper. "You're going to attract the rats!"

His gaze flashed to study the rugged landscape of the Carrionplace behind Frostmask as if he was expecting them to come surging over at any moment.

Which is a reasonable fear, Frostmask supposed.

Moving quickly, Frostmask shoved the rat towards the silver webbing. Its fur scraped the edges, but it was still small enough to

fit through one of the gaps in the web. Once she got it to the other side, Frostmask scaled the barrier again before jumping down next to Autumnleap and Lizardpaw.

"Let's get this out of sight of the Carrionplace," she said, hooking her claws into the rat's fur and dragging it into the trees.

Lizardpaw and Autumnleap followed her, although if the scowl on Autumnleap's face was any indication, he still had more to say about it. They moved the body a couple of boulder-lengths into the trees without any other rat appearing. Once the dense trunks hid the Carrionplace from sight, Frostmask pulled her claws out of the rat's fur, sat back on her haunches and hunched over to get a closer look at it again.

"Seriously Frostmask, have you gone frog-brained?" Autumnleap grumbled, his dark red tail twitching as he stood at her side. "You know that we're not supposed to go in the Carrionplace. What if the rats had shown up?"

She glanced up at him, her brow furrowing.

"I was only in there for one heartbeat to grab it," she protested. "This is the first poisoned rat that I've seen in a half moon! I couldn't pass it up just because it was a tail-length out of reach."

Autumnleap sighed.

"I know that it's important that we figure out what prey are poisoned so we can better avoid them. I don't enjoy worrying that every meal I eat could be my last either," he said. "But, I don't understand why you had to go in there to get this rat? It's already dead. I thought the point was we'd be able to know what prey was poisoned *before* the poison kills them."

"Yeah but to know that we need to know what signs we're looking for in the sick animals," Frostmask explained. "We know the bleeding doesn't start until right before death, so that's not useful for telling a poisoned animal from a healthy one. But, there might be a different indicator that we overlooked before."

Autumnleap's brow furrowed.

"Okay... I guess that makes sense," he said. "So what are we looking for?"

Frostmask went back to studying the rat.

"Anything unusual," she murmured, flipping the body over with her paw again.

Autumnleap and Lizardpaw leaned in as well, their tails twitching with concentration as they all peered down at the animal. Besides the blood, on the outside the rat appeared pretty normal. It was skinny and small, probably an adolescent, but its pelt was uniform. Nothing seemed off about its dark eyes or yellowed teeth.

"Maybe we should cut it open," Frostmask muttered. "The poison could've done something to its insides."

Autumnleap's muzzle wrinkled up in disgust. Frostmask glanced up at him, and a purr of amusement began to rumble in her throat.

"When did you become so squeamish?" she teased. "You never seemed to have a problem with tearing prey open when you eat it."

"But, yeah, I'm *eating* it," Autumnleap said, his tail-tip twitching. "It feels weird to cut something open for no reason."

Frostmask cocked her head to the side in confusion.

"But, it's not for no reason," she pointed out.

"Aren't you afraid of getting the poison on you?" Autumnleap asked, his brow furrowing.

"I'll just use my paws, and I'll wash them off in water instead of licking them clean," she promised. "Clearstream and Elmclaw said that the poison is only dangerous if we eat it."

Autumnleap's tail still flicked uncertainly, but after a few moments, he nodded.

Wasting no time, with a delicate slash of her claws, Frostmask tore open the belly of the rodent, peeling back skin and muscle to reveal the gleaming, dark organs beneath. The scent of fresh meat drifting into her nose made Frostmask's mouth water, despite the fact that she knew this animal was poisoned and even taking a single bite could be a death sentence. Ducking her head lower, Frostmask took a close look at the organs, but nothing seemed odd about them to her. It looked like any other piece of fresh-kill.

Frostmask's ears drooped in disappointment.

Maybe this was just another dead-end, and all those days she'd spent keeping watch on the Carrionplace were wasted. Frostmask sighed, about to admit defeat, but as she opened her mouth, she hesitated.

"Wait... do you smell that?" she asked.

Initially, she'd only smelt the sweet and tantalizing scent of fresh-kill, but as her nose had adjusted to it, she now seemed able to pick out a different edge to the scent— a deeper layer. But, she couldn't place the smell. It wasn't the putrid, rotting scent of when flesh went bad. Nor was it quite strong enough to be off-putting... but it was unusual.

Lizardpaw blinked hard, his nose twitching.

'Sour,' he confirmed, his sensitive nose picking up the odd smell easily.

Autumnleap opened his jaws, drawing the air over his tongue.

"Yeah," he said, his brow furrowing. "Now that you mention it, I can smell it too. That is weird."

Frostmask's heart began to thump hard.

"Right?! I've never noticed that with any other prey. This could be it! The sign of a poisoned animal that we've been looking for!" she meowed, glancing up to looking from Lizardpaw's face to Autumnleap's.

Lizardpaw's eyes were bright, reflecting Frostmask's excitement back at her. However, while Autumnleap appeared interested, he also seemed less convinced. Before he could say anything though, Frostmask's gaze was pulled towards the sky above them. It was getting late— the sun had started to dip below the horizon.

"We need to get back to camp before the gathering patrol is called," she said, shoving the rat towards the base of a nearby sycamore tree.

She stashed it a gap in the roots, hiding it from sight by arranging some leaf-litter in front of the hole, but marking the tree with her claws so she knew which one to return to.

"You're keeping the rat?" Autumnleap asked in confusion, staring after her.

She glanced back at him as she finished scouring her claws down the trunk.

"Well... yeah. For now. Clearstream and Elmclaw will want to inspect it for themselves later," she mewed.

Autumnleap's ears twisted back.

"I hardly understand any of this stuff," he muttered. "But, I'm glad that you're trying help the Clan."

Frostmask gave a soft purr and brushed her muzzle against his gratefully.

"Come on, let's go," she said, pointing her paws in the direction of camp.

They stopped by the stream to allow Frostmask to rinse her paws off on their way back, which delayed them a bit, but they still managed to arrive in camp in time. The sky had started to go dark, but no patrol had gathered yet. As Lizardpaw and Autumnleap went to drop their catches off at the fresh-kill pile, Frostmask headed straight to the medicine cats' den. She paused outside the lichen coated entrance for a moment, calling a greeting before she padded inside.

Clearstream's grey-striped form was almost lost in the shadows deep in the cave as she arranged some piles of freshly collected moss, but Elmclaw sat near the entrance. He was hunched over several dried plants, methodically sorting through the stores. Frostmask knew that with the return of the warmer weather, the medicine cats had been able to find and collect more herbs, but their stocks still weren't back to the levels they'd been before SkyClan's raid on their den.

Frostmask cleared her throat and both medicine cats glanced over at her.

"I've got great news," she said.

Frostmask quickly explained the rat that she found, and the unusual sour scent that she'd noted after she'd cut it open. As she spoke, Clearstream looked curious and thoughtful, while Elmclaw's eyes brightened with eagerness.

"That's amazing!" Elmclaw burst out when she concluded the story with where she left the rat. "This could be exactly what we need to tell good prey apart from poisoned ones."

"Frostmask did a great job noticing this," Clearstream added, nodding at her and Frostmask purred at the praise. "But, we need to look into this carefully. There are many things which could make meat smell a bit sour. That rat might have just gotten into some sort of weird two-leg junk for all we know."

Elmclaw's tail flicked impatiently, not put-off by the senior medicine cat's words of caution.

"It's the best lead we have right now, though." he said, already rising to his paws. "I want to check it out now before the body is allowed to decompose further, or some scavenger gets to it. Will you tell Sedgestar that I won't be attending the gathering tonight?"

Clearstream nodded, standing as well and padding towards Elmclaw and Frostmask in the front of the cave.

"Very well, I'll speak to him," she said.

Elmclaw purred and touched his muzzle to Clearstream's affectionately.

"Thank you," he meowed. "I'm going to head over there now then."

"Remember to look for the tree that I scratched," Frostmask chimed in.

Elmclaw nodded at her.

"I will. See you later!" he said, quickly hurrying from the cave.

Clearstream watched him go with a proud glint in her blue eyes before she turned to glance at the piles of dried herbs that Elmclaw had left on the ground. Clearstream sighed and shook her head.

"The frog-brain was in such a rush he didn't even put these away," Clearstream muttered, but there was affection in her voice.

As Clearstream went to push the dried leaves back into their stores, she inhaled sharply, making Frostmask's ears prick in concern.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Yes," Clearstream said, flexing a paw. "It's just some arthritis in my joints acting up. The damp weather makes it worse."

"Here, let me help then," Frostmask said, stepping in to slide the herbs into the narrow cracks in the cave walls. "You just have to tell me where each one goes."

"Thank you Frostmask," Clearstream sighed. "I have herbs for aching joints, but I've been saving them for others. Poor Darkpelt's injured leg has really been bothering him lately."

Frostmask frowned, glancing over at the medicine cat from the corner of her eye.

Arthritis was a condition that elders complained about. She'd never thought of Clearstream as particularly old, but she knew that she'd been ShadowClan's senior medicine cat for many, many seasons now, probably for nearly as long as Grovepelt had been a warrior.

Frostmask quickly finished putting the herbs away with Clearstream's help, and afterwards the two padded out of the den. Clearstream glanced over at Frostmask.

"Would you like to come with me to speak with Sedgestar?" she asked. "You can explain the rat to him. I'm sure he'd like to know."

Frostmask's pelt prickled slightly with apprehension. Sedgestar hadn't seemed super enthusiastic about her idea when she brought it up the first time. But, Elmclaw was clearly excited, and, although Clearstream was more cautious, she was also supportive as well...

Frostmask nodded.

"Alright," she meowed.

The two of them made their way over to the base of the Oak Tree, pausing by the entrance to Sedgestar's den. There, Clearstream meowed a greeting, and Sedgestar called for them to come in.

Frostmask followed Clearstream down the short tunnel and into Sedgestar's earthen den. Grovepelt was already in the den as well, and judging by their furrowed brows, it seemed like he and Sedgestar had been having some sort of serious discussion. Frostmask's stomach turned uneasily.

Have they been planning something about the gathering?

"Clearstream. Frostmask," Sedgestar said, nodding a hello to the two of them. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to inform you that Elmclaw will not be attending the gathering tonight," Clearstream said. "He's gone to investigate a rat carcass that Frostmask found by the Carrionplace. It appears to have died from poison, and we think it could contain valuable information which could allow us to avoid poisoned prey in the future."

Sedgestar's amber eyes slid from Clearstream to Frostmask, his gaze unreadable.

"I thought we agreed that such an endeavor would only lead to

more risk than reward?" he said.

Sedgestar's voice was mild, not accusative, but Frostmask still had to fight to keep the hairs on the back of her neck from bristling defensively. Luckily, Clearstream responded for her, giving Frostmask a few extra moments to smooth over her composure.

"I see no harm in Frostmask looking into the poisoning in her spare time," Clearstream said. "She took care to not ingest any poison, and the body was found outside the bounds of the Carrionplace, so the rats will have no reason to be angry with us for trespassing. Isn't that right?"

Clearstream glanced at Frostmask, and she nodded.

It was a lie, but a harmless one. No rat had seen her enter the Carrionplace to remove the body. And, the rat was so close to the edge, it was practically outside the place anyway.

"Besides," Clearstream continued. "Frostmask may have discovered something very important."

Clearstream paused and gazed at her again, and Frostmask took the cue to begin speaking.

"Yes," she said, raising her chin slightly in what she hoped was a confident expression. "There was an odd scent coming from the animal, which became more clear after I opened its belly and exposed the meat. It had this sour smell. It was subtle, but still distinct— not like any prey-scent I've noticed before. And, the meat wasn't rotten... it was just *off."*

Clearstream nodded.

"Elmclaw has gone to look into it now. But, if it is indeed the case, we may be able to expand our hunting ranges again, and then screen caught prey by using this smell to make sure that our fresh-kill has not been poisoned," she said.

"Autumnleap and Lizardpaw were with me, and they noticed the scent too," Frostmask added. "They'll be able to confirm it as well."

"That's wonderful!" Grovepelt purred, pride in his voice as he gazed at Frostmask. "Well done."

Frostmask dipped her head, her pelt warmed by the deputy's praise.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sedgestar said, his brow furrowed. "We do not even know if this scent sets in immediately after poisoning or only until after the poison has already killed the animal."

Clearstream nodded.

"More investigation is needed," she agreed.

"Perhaps we could confirm it if we could catch a piece a prey which we know likely ate some poison recently, but has not yet begun behaving as if it's ill," Frostmask spoke up.

One of Sedgestar's ears angled towards her.

"And, how would you do that?" he prompted, his amber eyes sharp as he stared at her.

"Put a couple of cats on watch at the Carrionplace," she said without hesitation. "We know the poison is in there, but the rats aren't the only creatures going in and eating it clearly. Have some cats kill mice or birds coming out of the Carrionplace, *carefully* with their claws, and see if they have the smell despite otherwise looking healthy."

Sedgestar blinked at her, quiet for a moment before giving a decisive nod.

"If Elmclaw's report back is promising, I will assign a few cats to the task tomorrow," he said. "After the prey is caught, I want you, Lizardpaw, Autumnleap, and Elmclaw to all confirm the scents. Cat's lives could depend on it, so there should be no mistaking it."

Frostmask couldn't stop her tail from lifting happily at Sedgestar's agreement. She dipped her head to him, expecting to be dismissed, but instead Sedgestar continued.

"Frostmask, I'm quite pleased with the amount of initiative you've been taking lately when it comes to trying to prevent more poisoning, as well as the information you've managed to collect during the previous gatherings," he said.

Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise.

He's not upset that I looked into the poisoning even though initially he told me not to?

Frostmask glanced up at him. When their gazes met, she saw that he had let the cool veil that usually covered his amber eyes drop, and now they glowed with undisguised warmth.

"You've come quite far from the timid kit who used to refuse to speak or meet anyone's eye," Sedgestar said. "I hope you know how valuable you are to our Clan."

Frostmask blinked and swallowed hard.

The way he said that— not how valuable you are to *the* Clan or to *Shadow*Clan— but to *our* Clan left an ache in Frostmask's chest.

Was it possible that Sedgestar finally understood that no matter what Frostmask's blood was, she was a ShadowClan cat through and through? Or, was it just another trick, something to get her to drop her guard? So, she'd fall placidly into line, blindly loyal to him? But, if that was the case, then why praise her for her disobedience?

Frostmask bowed her head to him again so Sedgestar wouldn't see the conflict in her gaze.

"Thank you, Sedgestar," she meowed.

"I would like you to join the gathering patrol tonight and continue keeping your ears open. Report back to me anything useful," he said.

"Of course," Frostmask said, still gazing at the ground.

A trickle of relief ran down her spine. Of course the information she'd been getting had been from Paledusk, not from overhearing

conversations at the gatherings. But, the fact that the information had been useful to ShadowClan so far made her feel more confident that she hadn't been wrong to meet with the SkyClan deputy.

Sedgestar gestured a dismissal to Frostmask with a flick of his tail, but Clearstream remained in the den with him and Grovepelt as Frostmask turned to emerge back outside. The sky had gone fully dark by now, and most of her clan-mates were mingling out in the clearing, waiting to hear who Sedgestar would call for the patrol. Frostmask's gaze scanned the crowd as she searched for her friends' pelts.

She spotted Poolcloud lounging with Dewleaf and Pineshade, and she padded over to them, lifting her tail in greeting.

"Hey guys," she said.

They all mewed hellos to her as she flopped onto the ground and began to groom the mud off of her paws. It was a futile task, especially in new-leaf in ShadowClan, but Frostmask couldn't stand it when it dried and started to cake in the long fur between her toes.

"Why were you in Sedgestar's den, Frostmask?" Dewleaf asked, her blue-green eyes bright and curious.

Frostmask opened her mouth to explain the rat situation, but then hesitated. Telling Pineshade or even Dewleaf about her idea to prevent more poisonings risked the information getting back to Dampfang... who of course seemed to view opposing Frostmask as his life's purpose.

Frostmask's tail twitched bitterly.

Dampfang would probably try to convince the Clan that I'm trying to ***get*** *everyone poisoned rather than preventing more poisonings.*

It seemed better to wait and have Sedgestar or Clearstream and Elmclaw explain the situation tomorrow, once Elmclaw came back from looking at the rat. Dampfang at least would be much less opposed to the idea coming from their leader and medicine cats,

rather than if he knew it came from her.

"Oh... you know, Sedgestar just asked me if I would join the gathering patrol," Frostmask said as nonchalantly as she could, going back to picking mud off of her paws.

Poolcloud's brow furrowed.

"That's kinda weird," he meowed. "Why'd he single you out like that instead of just calling your name for the patrol like everyone else?"

"I've been lucky enough to overhear snippets of important conversations between other Clans' warriors for the past few gatherings," Frostmask explained, the lie coming to her even more easily now after so many repetitions. "Sedgestar wants me to continue keeping my ears open."

Pineshade huffed incredulously, and Frostmask glanced at her. Pineshade swept her amber gaze up and down Frostmask's body, her ears flattening doubtfully.

"You. Sedgestar is having *you* be his spy?" Pineshade asked.

The fur down Frostmask's back prickled slightly.

"What? You don't believe me?" she asked, trying and failing to keep the defensiveness from her voice.

"I mean, I believe that this conversation happened, sure," Pineshade said, twitching her ears. "But, yeah. The whole concept feels pretty unbelievable honestly."

Frostmask scowled, and Pineshade flicked her black-furred tail against her flank.

"Now don't get all huffy about it," Pineshade said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not trying to insult you. I just mean that spies are supposed to be... I don't know, deceitful? Manipulative? Your disposition just doesn't seem suited for it. You're just too *nice."*

"I could be deceitful," Frostmask argued, her tail twitching. "Maybe I'm keeping secrets from you right now."

To Frostmask's growing irritation, Pineshade just laughed in response, her whiskers quivering in amusement as she purred.

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Pineshade challenged, her amber eyes glinting.

"Well if I told you, then it wouldn't be a secret, would it?" Frostmask grumbled, her tail twitching.

Pineshade leaned over and nudged her shoulder with her muzzle.

"Come on, unkink your tail Frostmask. You know I'm only teasing," Pineshade said, although her eyes still sparkled mischievously. "I'm very proud of you for being assigned to this *super secret spy* mission."

With a playful growl, Frostmask swatted at Pineshade's ears, but Pineshade swiftly retreated out of her range before her paws could make contact, still purring.

Frostmask heaved a dramatic sigh of defeat, rolling onto her back.

"Where's Autumnleap? I'm tired of hanging out with you annoying fur-balls," Frostmask jokingly complained.

Pineshade rolled her eyes so hard Frostmask thought that they might fall out of her skull.

"It's outrageous that you'd imply I'm more annoying than Autumnleap," Pineshade sniffed. "He's practically the most infuriating cat in existence."

"And, *I* take offense that you'd group me and Dewleaf in with the dreadful frog-brains that are Pineshade and Autumnleap," Poolcloud teased.

Growling playfully, Pineshade rolled onto her side so she could lash out at Poolcloud with a flurry of bunny-kicks from her hind-legs.

"How. Dare. You. I. Am. An. *Absolute.* Delight." Pineshade punctuated each word with another kick against Poolcloud's side.

"Ow! *Ow!* Too hard!" Poolcloud said, wincing beneath his sister's unyielding blows.

Half purring in laughter and half gasping in pain, Poolcloud scrambled away from Pineshade to hide behind Dewleaf, using her as a living shield, although Dewleaf's sleek grey form hardly sheltered all of Poolcloud's black-and-white bulk.

"Dewleaf! Protect me!" Poolcloud gasped.

Dewleaf fixed Pineshade with the sternest glare she could manage, and it even prickled the fur on Frostmask's shoulders, despite the fact that she wasn't the target. The look in Dewleaf's blue-green eyes contained the scariest aspects of her parents— both Darkpelt's ferocity and Larkfoot's fortitude.

"Stop bullying my mate," Dewleaf ordered.

Pineshade just huffed and rolled back to her paws.

"He started it," she said, licking a paw and using it to flatten her newly ruffled fur.

A low purr thrummed in Frostmask's throat as she gazed at her friends.

It'd been far too long since they could play and bicker like this without the existential fear for their Clan's survival looming over their heads. It was a relief to see light return to sparkle in Poolcloud's eyes after having been so dull with grief in the moon since Fogfur's death. And, Frostmask could no longer make out the shape of Pineshade's ribs beneath her dark, spiky coat, nor notice a deep weariness in Dewleaf's eyes.

If only she could preserve moments like these so they'd last forever. She wished she could hold onto them and keep them tucked near her nest like she could for a pretty stone or an interesting feather, and then pull them out later to return to when things got hard again.

But, moments didn't work like that; they were much more like trying to hold wind or water in her claws. It was impossible to keep

a solid grip on them. Instead they slipped away, leaving just a cool, tingling sensation on her paw-pads as the only indication that they'd ever existed at all.

This moment was ended as Sedgestar and Grovepelt emerged from the leader's den, and Sedgestar let out a yowl for attention. The group of warriors stopped their play-fighting as everyone's heads turned towards their leader.

"It's time to head out for the gathering," Sedgestar meowed. "Would the warriors and apprentices, Emberflower, Larkfoot, Dampfang, Cedarpaw, Mosspounce, Frostmask, Autumnleap, Leafbreeze, Pineshade, Cricketpaw, Rowanheart, and Hollowpaw please join the patrol."

Pineshade looked quite pleased about being chosen, and Frostmask figured she must be eager to show Cricketpaw around since this would be the younger apprentices' first gathering. Frostmask rose to her paws, nodding goodbye to Poolcloud and Dewleaf. She glanced around, and she spotted Autumnleap sitting next to Beeclaw. He rose to his paws when Sedgestar finished his announcement and murmured something into Beeclaw's ear before padding over to Frostmask to join the gathering patrol. Beeclaw watched him go with hollow eyes, and Frostmask's heart twisted as she glanced at him.

Beeclaw had fallen into a deep depression in the moon since Hootflight's death, which he had not yet been able to shake. Unlike everyone else in the Clan, who had started to put some padding back on their bones as prey returned to their territory, the outline of Beeclaw's skeleton was still sharp beneath his short pelt. He didn't patrol or hunt as much anymore either, instead spending most of his time doing tasks around camp, or glued to Elmclaw's side, helping out with basic medicine cat's duties.

Autumnleap had been spending a lot of time with him recently, and he and Thornheart had at least been able to coast Beeclaw out into the forest a few times with them on hunts. But, progress was slow.

As Autumnleap reached her, Frostmask gently touched her nose to his in greeting as they padded after the rest of the gathering patrol

out of camp.

"How's Beeclaw?" Frostmask murmured.

Worry flashed in Autumnleap's eyes.

"Mostly the same," he sighed. "I thought about telling him about what you discovered today about the rat..."

His voice trailed off, and Frostmask prompted him gently.

"...But?" she asked.

Autumnleap's ears twisted back.

"But, I didn't tell him because I was worried that if he found out that there is a way to tell what pieces of prey are poisoned, he'd just blame himself more for not noticing," Autumnleap muttered.

Frostmask's ears twisted back.

"He's going to find out eventually though," she said. "Elmclaw has already gone to investigate it, and I spoke to Sedgestar about it as well. If Elmclaw agrees about the scent, Sedgestar is going to look more into it tomorrow."

Autumnleap sighed.

"I know," he murmured.

She brushed her flank against his reassuringly, and he gave her a grateful blink.

Silence settled over the patrol as they traveled towards Fourtrees. Crickets hummed in the darkness for the first time in moons, and their fading songs as the ShadowClan cats stalked by their hiding spots were the only sounds that indicated the cats' progression through the woods.

Sedgestar guided their group to the tunnel that ran under the thunderpath, and the patrol went streaming through it like rain water. On the other side, Frostmask's ears jutted up eagerly as they

approached the edge of the hollow that encircled Fourtrees. Since the last gathering hadn't convened due to cloud-covered skies, it seemed like it'd been ages since she'd seen any cats outside her clan-mates. Besides Paledusk, of course.

Will we speak tonight?

Frostmask's tail twitched. They hadn't discussed it, but she felt probably not. Her seeking out the SkyClan deputy would likely seem out of place, for good reason, and she was nervous to draw too much attention to their relationship. What if one of her clan-mates figured out that she'd been meeting him?

They reached the top of the hill, where the patrol paused. Frostmask opened her jaws to drink in the cool night air, and she was greeted by the scents of ThunderClan, SkyClan and RiverClan.

I'll see if Larchtail is here though.

Frostmask's paws prickled with eagerness. If she ran into the SkyClan warrior, this would be the first time that they'd meet when Frostmask was aware that the two of them were kin.

Sedgestar flicked in his tail to signal the patrol forward, and the group streamed down the hill and into Fourtrees. As soon as they passed the ring of undergrowth and entered the clearing, Frostmask noticed some nearby RiverClan, ThunderClan, and even SkyClan cats nodding friendly hellos to the appearing ShadowClan warriors. Frostmask blinked, pleasant surprise swirling in her belly at the other Clans' relaxed attitude.

Frostmask turned to glance at the rest of the ShadowClan patrol to see how her clan-mates were responding to the warm reception. The cordial attitude seemed infectious because the ShadowClan patrol willingly split apart to mingle with the other Clans. Frostmask saw Larkfoot purring a greeting to a RiverClan queen. Dampfang and Pineshade dived into the crowd of cats with their apprentices in tow, showing them around the place. Mosspounce and Leafbreeze went to go talk to Foxbite and Juniperfrost, two ThunderClan warriors.

"They all seem pretty friendly tonight," Autumnleap remarked, lingering at Frostmask's shoulder.

"Yeah," Frostmask said with a nod of agreement. "Maybe more prey and warming weather is putting everyone in good moods."

"Or maybe it's because we haven't see each other in two moons. It's been long enough that cats have forgotten why we hate each other," Autumnleap said drily, twitching his whiskers.

Frostmask flexed her claws briefly, her mind flashing back to SkyClan's devastating raid on the ShadowClan's camp from several moons ago.

"Oh I don't think that's the case," she muttered under her breath. "But, maybe it's been long enough that cats are *willing* to forget. At least for this one night."

Autumnleap's gaze flashed over the crowd.

"I want to see if Barredpaw's here," he meowed as he searched for the ThunderClan cat. "I wonder if he and Screechpaw have gotten their warrior names yet."

He angled an ear towards the crowd, and playfulness sparkled in his amber eyes.

"Wanna come with? We can brag to them about how perfect our relationship is, until they're totally sick of talking to us," he suggested, his tail flicking mischievously.

Frostmask purred softly. A part of her really wanted to say yes, and to spend the night at Autumnleap's side, purring at the way he joked with and teased the ThunderClan brothers. But, another part of her was desperate to seek out Larchtail, and finally get to speak to her not just as a ShadowClan cat to a SkyClan one, but as kin to kin.

"...I actually wanted to meet with Larchtail, if she's here," she said, blinking at him apologetically.

Autumnleap's brow furrowed.

"The SkyClan warrior?" he asked, a quiet growl of discontent entering into his voice.

"She's not that bad," Frostmask protested. "She and I are on pretty friendly terms actually."

Autumnleap still looked a bit doubtful, but Frostmask didn't want to waste anymore of their precious time at the gathering trying to convince Autumnleap that Larchtail was actually a good cat.

"If I can't find her, I'll come find you," she promised.

Autumnleap blinked and flicked his newly torn ear in concession.

"Alright, that's fair," he said, purring briefly as he brushed his muzzle against hers. "I hope you don't think it's selfish of me to say that I'm hoping she didn't come."

Frostmask just purred in response, and then the two of them padded off into the crowd in different directions. Frostmask weaved around groups of cats, her eyes flashing from pelt to pelt as she searched for the familiar brown tabby. But, it was a white pelt that caught her eye instead as she walked by the base of the Great Rock and passed within a couple of fox-lengths of Paledusk.

He caught her gaze for the briefest of moments and subtly inclined his head towards her, his green eyes sparkling with their shared secret. Frostmask twitched an ear in his direction in response, but didn't acknowledge him further as she dipped back into the crowd.

Then, finally as she reached the opposite end of the clearing, Frostmask's ears perked up in excitement as she caught sight of Larchtail's tabby pelt.

She was sitting next to a striking tortoiseshell warrior who also smelt of SkyClan; the two of them had their heads leaned close together as they purred. As Frostmask drew closer to the pair, she noticed that there was something about the tortoiseshell's appearance or somewhat unusual scent which seemed familiar to her, but she couldn't quite put her paw on what. But, before Frostmask could think on it more, Larchtail's gaze flickered over in

her direction, and Larchtail straightened, blinking at Frostmask warmly.

"Frostmask!" she greeted, dipping her head to her as she approached. "It's been awhile. How have you been?"

"I'm well," Frostmask said, unable to stop a purr from rumbling in her throat as she gazed at Larchtail— her kin!— "How are you?"

"I'm doing alright," Larchtail said with a good-natured shrug. "I'm definitely grateful for the warming weather."

As Frostmask nodded in agreement, she couldn't stop her gaze from drifting from Larchtail to her tortoiseshell companion, who was watching their exchange with curious hazel eyes. Now that Frostmask was closer, she was certain that she had met this cat before, although she still couldn't quite figure out where.

The tortoiseshell warrior was strikingly beautiful— they had a very distinctive pelt with an almost perfect split down the center of their face, separating it into a brilliant orange half and a pitch black one. Larchtail's gaze flickered from Frostmask over to the tortoiseshell, and Frostmask noticed Larchtail's chest puff out in pride.

"Frostmask, this is my mate, Mottledflame," Larchtail introduced, gazing at the SkyClan warrior with shining eyes. "Mottledflame, Frostmask."

Mottledflame dipped their head to Frostmask.

"Hello," they said in a voice that was deep and lilting. "It's nice to meet you."

Mottledflame lifted their head back up, and a spark of mischief appeared in their eyes.

"Although I think we've run into each other before," they added, arching a brow.

Larchtail's tail swished in surprise, and she looked from Mottledflame to Frostmask and back again.

"You have?" she asked. "When?"

Frostmask blinked, the memory finally hitting her.

"At the battle in ShadowClan's camp," Frostmask meowed. "We fought against each other."

Mottledflame nodded.

"Yes," they confirmed. "Your fur markings aren't easy to forget."

Frostmask's ears warmed slightly as she was reminded of her unusual coat, but instead of letting the comment get to her, she just twitched her whiskers.

"Well neither is yours," she retorted. "You have the most striking tortoiseshell pattern that I've ever seen."

Mottledflame purred.

"You're very kind. And, I'm sorry about the fight," Mottledflame said, dry humor in their voice. "I would not have been so eager to leap into combat with you, if I'd known you were Larchtail's friend."

"Don't worry about it," Frostmask said, giving her head a small shake. "We can't stop our clans from fighting. Larchtail and I've previously clawed each other up before too, although we're back on good terms now."

Larchtail nodded.

"Frostmask is a noble warrior," she explained to Mottledflame. "She helped me once rescue Birdstrike from the thick of battle when ShadowClan and ThunderClan attacked our camp."

Mottledflame gazed at Frostmask kindly.

"Then all of SkyClan should be grateful to you," they said, bowing their head to her slightly.

Frostmask dipped her head to rasp her tongue down her chest fur, her ears warming with embarrassment again.

"I was just doing what I hope any cat with honor would've done," she meowed.

Before Mottledflame or Larchtail could respond, another SkyClan tortoiseshell who looked similar to Mottledflame, but without the same striking markings strode up to the group.

The stranger tortoiseshell narrowed her eyes at Frostmask.

"ShadowClan," she growled, the blatant hostility in her voice prickling the fur on the back of Frostmask's neck.

Without even giving Frostmask a chance to respond, she whipped her muzzle towards Mottledflame.

"Come sit with me," she ordered.

Frostmask blinked at the she-cat's presumptuous, bossy tone. Larchtail also clearly seemed bothered by it since the fur on her shoulders bristled.

"Mottledflame can sit where they want, Spottedflower," Larchtail growled.

"It's okay," Mottledflame soothed, rising to their paws. "I don't mind."

Spottedflower shot Larchtail a smug glance, and Frostmask another aggressive one before whirling around and stalking back off with Mottledflame in tow.

"You know that you're supposed to stick close to our clan-mates. And, why in StarClan's name would you be talking to ***ShadowClan?!"*** Frostmask heard Spottedflower hiss scoldingly before the two of them padded out of earshot.

Larchtail's tail thumped against the ground with annoyance.

"That's Mottledflame's sister," she explained to Frostmask, glaring after where the two of them disappeared into the crowd. "I'm sorry about that. Spottedflower is a brat in the best of times, but she's especially pissed at ShadowClan right now, since their mother

Sparrowheart died from the wounds she received in the battle in your camp."

"I... oh... oh no," Frostmask said, her ears flattening against her head.

A sudden surge of guilt knotted in her stomach.

"I had no idea. I'm so sorry, I should've never brought that battle up," she said, ducking her head. "Mottledflame must be really upset with me."

"Oh it's okay," Larchtail meowed, making Frostmask's ears jut up in surprise. "Mottledflame wasn't at all close to Sparrowheart. They had a pretty strained relationship."

"Really?" Frostmask asked, blinking hard as she lifted her head.

If May had still been alive, Frostmask couldn't imagine not being close to her.

Larchtail's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Sparrowheart never understood Mottledflame," she explained.

Larchtail shook her head slightly as if to dislodge unpleasant memories before she glanced over at Frostmask and blinked at her gratefully.

"By the way, thanks for being so nice to Mottledflame," Larchtail meowed.

Frostmask tilted her head to the side, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"Of course. Mottledflame's your mate. Why would I be rude?" she asked.

Larchtail blinked, her gaze flickering away for a moment.

"I'm sure you noticed Mottledflame's scent," she said. "They were born as neither a tom nor a she-cat... Lots of our clan-mates can be

cruel to them."

Frostmask blinked in muted surprise. She had noticed something unusual about Mottledflame's scent when she first caught it, but that thought had been faint and had been immediately forgotten when she'd started talking to the pair.

"...And I'm guessing Sparrowheart was one of those cats?" Frostmask asked.

A quiet growl entered Larchtail's voice as her gaze sharpened with anger.

"Right," she rumbled.

Frostmask frowned. How could a mother hate their kit for something like that, entirely out of their control?

"And, some of our clan-mates have *strong* feelings about the fact that we're mates," Larchtail added, her tail lashing.

"Really?" Frostmask said, her brow furrowing even deeper. "That's awful! Why do they care?"

Larchtail's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wouldn't your clan-mates?" she asked.

Frostmask paused for a moment, considering.

She couldn't say for sure that if Mottledflame was born in ShadowClan instead of SkyClan that it would be completely easy for them. That'd be naive to think— after all, Frostmask had spent a lot of her life being taunted just for having a weird fur pattern, for StarClan's sake. Cats could be cruel no matter where you were, and being different in any way just made you a bigger target for ridicule.

But still, Frostmask did have a nagging feeling that even if cruel cats still would tease Mottledflame in ShadowClan, that ShadowClan would care less about who they were in a relationship with than the SkyClan cats seemed to. In Frostmask's experience,

ShadowClan seemed to think that who a cat's mate was, was their own private concern, as long as no one was being harmed of course.

No one had asked Swoopstrike and Dappledpelt to clarify their nebulous relationship, which had seemed to be one that was not quite friends, but not quite mates either. Frostmask had seen how close Elmclaw and Beeclaw were, but no cat in ShadowClan said a word to question them. Although she had noticed Darkpelt or Dampfang occasionally casting the couple nasty looks... but she'd always assumed that came more from their personal dislike towards Elmclaw than it did from disapproval of his relationship with Beeclaw.

Frostmask had even heard the rumor that Redclaw's and Emberflower's mother had never named her mate. It felt strongly implied that their father wasn't in ShadowClan, but ask any cat to make the accusation out loud, and instead they'd insist that *'It isn't any of my business.'*

"I think ShadowClan tends to keep their noses out of cat's personal relationships," Frostmask said to Larchtail finally.

Larchtail let out a huff that sounded mildly impressed.

"Well, by StarClan," she meowed, giving her head a small shake. "I'd never thought that there'd be a day that I'd wish that I was a ShadowClan cat. But, here we are."

A purr of amusement rumbled in Frostmask's chest.

"There's always a first time for everything," she pointed out. "And, besides, being a ShadowClan cat isn't all that bad. I think you'd come to like it eventually."

Larchtail crinkled her nose up in disgust, but gave a playful *mrrow*.

"Yeah, but then I'd smell like a ShadowClan cat. And, you all *reek,"* she teased, her eyes shining with mischief as she prodded Frostmask's shoulder with a paw.

Frostmask let out a sharp squeak of offense.

"We do *not!"* she huffed.

"Look, I like you Frostmask," Larchtail purred. "But, all of ShadowClan smells like bog water and frogs."

Frostmask opened her jaws to retort, but before she could, a yowl rang out from the Great Rock.

"Welcome all!" Fennelstar shouted. "It has been more than a moon since we last met, so there surely must be a lot to discuss! Let's begin this new-leaf gathering!"

Frostmask realized that during the time that she'd been talking with Larchtail and Mottledflame, WindClan had arrived to the clearing, and now Fourtrees teemed with cats from all five of the Clans. But, at Fennelstar's call, quiet settled down over the clearing and each cat turned to gaze up at their leader. Fennelstar still stood at the very front of the Great Rock, his eyes bright and clear, and his tail held high.

He looks a lot healthier than he did at the last gathering. Frostmask noticed. *He must have healed from whatever illness that he had before.*

Fennelstar raised his chin, clearly intent on sharing SkyClan's news first.

"This season has been harsh, but SkyClan has still managed to thrive. In the past two moons, we've welcomed a litter of healthy kits, born to Suneyes, as well as named two new apprentices, Galepaw and Flypaw!"

"Galepaw! Flypaw! Galepaw! Flypaw!"

Most cats cheered, although Frostmask also picked up some disgruntled muttering from ThunderClan warriors, and silent dissent in the stony eyes of some of her clan-mates.

"Their Clan is only thriving because they stole ThunderClan's land!" Foxbite hissed from a little ways away.

Frostmask's tail twitched.

And, ShadowClan's herbs.

But, despite her private agreement with the ThunderClan warrior, Frostmask still cheered for the new SkyClan apprentices, albeit mostly because she was sitting next to Larchtail. As the cheering quieted, Fennelstar took a step back.

"I have nothing else to report," he said, inclining his head towards the other leaders.

Rabbitstar took his silent invitation to stride forward.

"WindClan is strong as well," he meowed, raising his tail with pride. "My kits have become warriors! WindClan welcomes Lavenderfoot, Honeystorm, Deerleap, Ryefur, and Harestrike!"

Again the Clans cheered for the named cats, although Frostmask found her tongue stumbling as she tried to make it through the long mouthful of names. Having five kits in a single litter all survive to gain their warrior names was quite a feat.

Frostmask's gaze scanned the crowd searching for them, and she found a group of WindClan warriors sitting together who all shared Rabbitstar's large ears, which were pricked in pride.

As the cheering died down, Rabbitstar continued.

"I am pleased to announce that Wheatfur is also expecting kittens," he purred, shooting a glance down at where his deputy sat at the base of the Great Rock.

The pretty golden she-cat rose to her paws, her chin raised happily. Beneath Wheatfur's long coat, Frostmask could make out the shape of her growing stomach, although the deputy still appeared quite strong and lithe, like she'd still be able to claw an intruder up without breaking a sweat.

"Tumblefox will take over as temporary deputy during the time that Wheatfur spends in the nursery, so you may see him taking her place at gatherings for a few moons," Rabbitstar continued, his gaze flickering to a ginger tom who blinked and dipped his head in acknowledgement.

"Although I also have some sad news to impart," Rabbitstar said, his tail drooping slightly. "In the past moon, a pair of dogs got loose in our moor, and we lost Runningfoot and Flippaw in the resulting attack. The dogs have since been driven off, but WindClan is still grieving their loss."

A murmur of condolences swept through the clearing. Rabbitstar nodded a thanks in acknowledgment of them before stepping back.

"WindClan has no further news to share," he said.

He glanced over at Sedgestar out of the corner of his eye, who rose to his paws and strode to the front of the Great Rock.

"ShadowClan has also suffered some losses in the past two moons," Sedgestar said, a slight mournful slouch to his shoulders. "A bout of greencough claimed the lives of one of our elders, Flymask, as well as two powerful warriors, Fogfur and Hootflight. They shall be sorely missed by our Clan."

Despite the fact that Frostmask knew that Sedgestar wouldn't want to share any information about the poisoning to the other Clans, her ears still pricked in surprise to hear him announce Hootflight's cause of death as greencough. Again a wave of condolences swept through the clearing, although this sympathy seemed a bit more authentic since some ThunderClan warriors appeared genuinely saddened by ShadowClan's loss.

Larchtail gently nudged Frostmask's shoulder with her muzzle.

"I'm sorry about your clan-mates," she whispered.

"Thank you," Frostmask murmured back, giving her a nod of gratitude.

"Although I am happy to report that all sickness is now gone from ShadowClan," Sedgestar said, continuing after the clearing quieted. "We regain strength with each passing day, and our Clan is growing. In the past moon, Amberberry has given birth to three healthy kits, Mallowkit, Minnowkit, and Marigoldkit!"

"Mallowkit! Minnowkit! Marigoldkit!" a familiar voice yowled, and

Frostmask glanced over to see that Mosspounce had started a lone cheer for her younger siblings, despite the fact that kit names weren't typically chanted.

At Mosspounce's interjection, *mrrows* of laughter rippled through the gathering with some cats outside of ShadowClan even taking up Mosspounce's cheer. Even Larchtail joined in, flicking her tail against Frostmask's flank playfully.

"Mallowkit! Minnowkit! Marigoldkit!"

As the clans cheered for the kits, Sedgestar gazed down at the clearing in a rare moment of indulgence, his amber eyes glinting in amusement. Frostmask realized that the atmosphere at this gathering might be *the* most relaxed that she'd ever experienced. Instead of just tolerating each other for the one night of the truce, cats from different Clans were acting as if they were among actual friends.

"Thank you," Sedgestar said once the cats quieted once more. "We have nothing more to report. Morningstar or Willowstar?"

Morningstar took Sedgestar's place at the front of the boulder.

"ThunderClan is doing well," Morningstar rumbled in his deep voice. "We've gained two new warriors— please welcome Barredclaw and Screechfang!"

They have become warriors!

Again the Clans took up the chant, and Frostmask searched the crowd for the two brothers. She found them sitting close to Autumnleap, who gave them each a friendly, congratulatory nudges on their shoulders as their names were called.

"We also have three new apprentices. Boulderpaw and Seedpaw have started their warrior training, and Squirrelpaw has chosen to follow the path of a medicine cat," Morningstar purred.

"Boulderpaw! Seedpaw! Squirrelpaw!" cats cheered.

"And, finally, our Clan continues to grow," Morningstar announced,

his chest puffing up. "Nettlepelt has recently moved to the nursery, expecting Acornear's kits!"

At the base of the Great Rock, Acornear straightened with pride, his eyes shining.

"That's the end of ThunderClan's report," Morningstar said, dipping his head.

Finally, Willowstar glided forward, her long grey tabby fur swaying around her.

"RiverClan prospers as well," she purred. "Our younger medicine cat has completed her training and gained her full name, Hailberry."

"Hailberry! Hailberry!" Everyone cheered loudly for the new medicine cat.

Hailberry's face beamed with delight as bright as the sun from where she was sitting between Swallowfur, the SkyClan medicine cat, and Pebblestripe, her former mentor.

Willowstar raised her chin, still purring as the cheering ebbed.

"Besides that, we do not have anything else to report. The fish are fat and slow, and the sun grows warmer on our pelts each day," she said, her eyes sparkling. "There's little more that we can ask for than that. Let us all give thanks to StarClan for the return of new-leaf, and may the forests, moors, and rivers continue to provide bountiful supplies of prey!"

Contented purrs, mews of agreement, and prayers of thanks to StarClan were all murmured in response to Willowstar's concluding remarks. The gathering at a close, cats began to stretch and rise to their paws, meowing goodbyes to their companions. Frostmask turned to Larchtail.

"It was good to see you," Frostmask purred.

"You too," Larchtail purred in response, briefly brushing her muzzle against Frostmask's in goodbye. "I'll see you later."

"See you. Also, tell Mottledflame that I say bye too, and that it was nice to meet them!" Frostmask added.

"I will," Larchtail purred, pulling away. "Bye!"

"Bye!" Frostmask meowed to her back as Larchtail turned and bounded off into the crowd.

Frostmask turned towards the area where ShadowClan was convening, and she trotted over to her clan-mates. As Frostmask padded across the clearing, she noticed Sedgestar give cordial nods to each of the four other leaders before bounding down from the Great Rock and joining Grovepelt to head back towards their group. But, cats weren't in a rush to leave the gathering this moon, so it took a few moments longer for all of their clan-mates to meander over to rejoin the rest of their patrol.

"Everyone is accounted for," Grovepelt reported, and Sedgestar gave him an appreciative nod.

"Come on," Sedgestar meowed, flicking his tail to indicate for the patrol to follow as he turned to climb up the hill that led back in the direction of their territory.

Customary for ShadowClan, they fell into silence as they exited Fourtrees and headed for the tunnel to travel back onto their own territory. But, what wasn't usual was when Sedgestar turned back to face the patrol when they'd just emerged back onto ShadowClan land. His tabby pelt prickled in excitement and anticipation, and his long tail flicked, betraying his impatience as he waited for all of their patrol to exit from the tunnel.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she stared at her leader.

What's going on?

She glanced over to meet her gaze with Autumnleap's, but he just shrugged at her, looking as confused as she was. Then, as the final cat in their patrol, Larkfoot, padded out of the tunnel, blinking as she entered back into the moonlight, Sedgestar began to speak.

"Morningstar and I have decided. We've waited long enough,"

Sedgestar said, his voice hushed but hard as he stared at his clanmates.

He curled his lip back, his fangs glinting in the light of the full moon.

"It's *finally* time for us to get our revenge on SkyClan and RiverClan."

War

Two ShadowClan patrols prowled through the ThunderClan woods. The freshly unfurled leaves in the canopy above waved in a gentle breeze, and morning sunlight drifted through the branches to dapple gold on Frostmask's pelt.

Frostmask raised her muzzle to the wind and opened her jaws to drink in the sweet tinge of nectar in the air.

Blood would be spilt in battle today, and they'd chosen the most beautiful new-leaf day for it.

The well disciplined ShadowClan patrols had unruffled pelts and walked in silence, but their eagerness for battle shone in their gleaming eyes and swift steps. They'd spent a long time waiting to get their revenge against SkyClan and RiverClan for the attack against their camp— almost a whole season in fact. But, the wait would be worth it. Prey was returning to the forest, and thanks to Frostmask's discovery with the poisoned rat, they'd learned how to avoid poisoned fresh-kill. After many days of full bellies, almost every ShadowClan warrior was back to full physical strength. The delay had also allowed for plenty of planning, and now the coming battles were plotted out down to the second.

There were to be two concurrent attacks at sun-high— one against SkyClan and one against RiverClan. The plan for the attack against SkyClan was a deceptively simple one. Mid-morning, between SkyClan border patrols, ThunderClan would move their scent-markers to reclaim the land stolen from them during leaf-bare, and then they would simply wait for SkyClan to come to them. SkyClan had grown used to the territory and would certainly not want to lose it without a fight. ThunderClan had also been harrying SkyClan at the border for some sunrises now, so their claim on the territory would not come as a surprise to SkyClan cats. However, hopefully ShadowClan's involvement would be. The idea was SkyClan would show up expecting a border skirmish, but be met with a vicious ambush instead.

For RiverClan, however, the plan was quite different. A much smaller ShadowClan patrol would infiltrate their camp in order to steal herbs, in repayment for what had happened to ShadowClan in leaf-bare. That was to be a stealth mission, and today was chosen specifically for its purpose. The lovely, balmy weather would attract RiverClan to the water like ants to honey. If all went according to plan, their camp should be virtually empty by sun-high, as the RiverClan cats spent the hottest part of the day cooling off in the river. On top of that, a ThunderClan patrol would create a scuffle with the RiverClan cats on the bank, ensuring they stayed plenty distracted.

Frostmask's tail twitched, her stomach rolling a bit uneasily.

She wasn't completely sure how she felt about the herb theft. It was a low blow, that was sure, but whenever she started to feel bad for RiverClan, she remembered Buzzardpaw's and Fogfur's slow and painful decline from greencough, and her sympathy evaporated.

Still though, Sedgestar's decision to pay RiverClan back in kind was a controversial one. He and Clearstream had had several increasingly public arguments about it. Frostmask suspected that they had tried to keep their disagreements private initially, but as both cats stubbornly dug in their claws, tensions heightened.

Frostmask had never seen ShadowClan's political leader and spiritual leader so at odds with each other before. Most of the time, they treated each other with great respect, giving weight to every opinion. But, for this issue, neither would be moved.

Frostmask grimaced slightly as she recalled their vitriolic final argument from yesterday evening.

"We're *warriors,"* Sedgestar had hissed in exasperation.

He and Clearstream had both been inside of the cave in Clanrock, but their voices had rose enough that his words echoed loud and clear through the camp, easily reaching Frostmask's ears.

"We battle with the other Clans. You know that. You've never had a problem with us fighting, lying, or stealing before!"

"Those weren't herbs," Clearstream had snapped. "*Medicine,* Sedgestar! If you steal them from RiverClan it's not just warriors' lives you put at risk, but queens, elders, and kits too! Warriors have honor. Without that, we're just a band of rogues, and as ShadowClan's medicine cat, I cannot condone this roguish behavior!"

"Flymask was an elder, and Buzzardpaw a kit when he first fell ill," Sedgestar had shot back. "But, they both died because of SkyClan's and RiverClan's theft. I didn't see Swallowfur or Pebblestripe jumping to stop their Clans from launching that attack."

"I know they tried," Clearstream had hissed. "Swallowfur and Pebblestripe have been my friends for seasons; they'd never support such an attack on my herb stores, just as I'd never support an attack on theirs."

"But, it happened! Whether the medicine cats liked it or not, Fennelstar, Willowstar, SkyClan and RiverClan, raided our herbs," Sedgestar had snarled. "We're just paying them back in kind."

"Then you prove that we're no better than they are," Clearstream had spat in a low voice.

A loud growl had rumbled in Sedgestar's throat.

"It's new-leaf. Their herbs will already be growing and blooming in their territory. They didn't show us that same mercy in leaf-bare."

Tail lashing, Sedgestar had stalked out of the medicine cats' den then, ending the conversation.

Frostmask shook her ears, bringing herself back to the present. The herb theft would happen as planned, despite Clearstream's best efforts. Sedgestar's only concession to her was that the ShadowClan patrol raiding RiverClan's camp was comprised only of volunteers—any cat who took moral issue with it didn't have to join. Sedgestar was even heading the patrol, as if to show that he wouldn't ask his warriors to do something that he wouldn't do himself.

And, if ShadowClan's leader stealing RiverClan's herbs doesn't send a

message to Willowstar, nothing will...

Frostmask's gaze flickered over the cats around her. Mosspounce, Dewleaf, Dustleap, Marshnose and Snakeeyes were on Sedgestar's smaller patrol and already prepared for the infiltration into RiverClan territory. Mosspounce's pale ginger coat and Snakeeyes' white one were both splattered with mud to camouflage their more conspicuous colors, and all of them already smelt like marsh plants. They'd rolled in a combination of reeds and fragrant flowers that grew near the river on ShadowClan land, and they would blend right in with the damp RiverClan territory scents.

With Sedgestar occupied, Grovepelt took responsibility for leading Frostmask's patrol against SkyClan. As she glanced over at Grovepelt, nervousness for the older warrior flashed in her chest. Grovepelt hadn't fought in many of the recent battles, besides defending their camp from SkyClan, and she was worried about how he'd fare. But, despite his age, the deputy's green eyes were hard and determined as he stalked at the front of the SkyClan battle patrol at Sedgestar's shoulder.

Frostmask's eyes drifted over her other clan-mates. At the head of their patrol with Grovepelt was Dampfang and Cedarpaw. Dampfang's tail-tip was twitching, betraying his eagerness to rip into the SkyClan warriors. He'd been pushing for ShadowClan to get vengeance for several moons now, and Frostmask wouldn't want to be in the paw-prints of the SkyClan cats who were caught in the path of his rage tonight. Cedarpaw walked next to his mentor's shoulder, his face creased in a serious frown. Despite being in the younger cohort of apprentices, Cedarpaw looked nearly like a warrior already with corded muscles rippling beneath his short pelt. But, Cedarpaw had hardened in more ways than one under Dampfang's tutelage. Frostmask's mind drifted back to his first day as an apprentice as she recalled his self-conscious and sometimes outright timid demeanor. He was still a quiet cat, but now Cedarpaw carried himself with a far more confident air. He'd definitely turned into an effective hunter and fighter, but Frostmask did occasionally worry about if Dampfang was pushing him too hard.

Behind that group was Pineshade and Cricketpaw. Cricketpaw's tail

was flicking with nervousness, but Pineshade would brush her pelt against her apprentice's reassuringly every few strides. Then near the two of them were Dappledpelt and Leafbreeze. The mother and daughter pair moved in matched-step; their identical lean forms could be mirrors of the other if it wasn't for their completely different pelt colors.

Then finally, Frostmask brought up the rear of the patrol with Autumnleap on one side of her, and Lizardpaw on the other. Frostmask glanced over at her apprentice, pride for him battling with worry in her chest. This would be his first battle since the raid on their camp, and while he'd turned into a very effective fighter in the intervening moons, Frostmask couldn't stamp out her nagging anxiety. Lizardpaw had been the only one of his littermates picked for the attack patrols, and while Frostmask tried to think that was because Sedgestar had acknowledged his fighting prowess, she couldn't also escape the idea that it was one of Sedgestar's tests to see how Lizardpaw would manage with his disability in a real, organized battle.

Frostmask shook her ears slightly, trying to dislodge the buzzing worry. It wasn't that she lacked faith in Lizardpaw's abilities to fight well. Or that she was particularly upset that Sedgestar's chose him for the patrol, although if it was a test, Sedgestar's underhandedness about it did annoy her. But, Frostmask was acutely aware of the fact that there had been a string of ShadowClan deaths at SkyClan's paws, starting with Swoopstrike, and she didn't want this streak to continue. The dreadful thought of Lizardpaw being the next casualty almost made her heart stop.

The fur on her flank stirred, and she glanced over to her other side. Autumnleap had brushed his tail against her comfortingly as if he'd sensed her nervousness, and now he was gazing at her with gentle amber eyes. Frostmask blinked at him appreciatively, a soft purr rumbling her in throat in response.

As they drew closer to the contested ThunderClan-SkyClan border, Sedgestar signaled for the patrols to halt by flashing of one of Lizardpaw's signs with his tail. The ShadowClan patrol stilled and complete silence wreathed around the group. Frostmask glanced up at the dense, bright green canopy, birdsong ringing in her ears as

they waited for the ThunderClan cats.

It wasn't long before the undergrowth stirred, and Morningstar's large, board shouldered frame came striding out, followed by a small patrol of ThunderClan warriors. Frostmask's stomach twisted and she realized how few cats were with him. Besides Morningstar, there was only Pineclaw, Foxbite, Barredclaw, and one golden-furred apprentice that she didn't recognize. The majority of the fighting against SkyClan would fall on ShadowClan's shoulders.

But, ThunderClan couldn't bring too many warriors, because they have to look like a regular border patrol. Plus a larger battle patrol of them will be fighting RiverClan to distract them during Sedgestar's raid. She reminded herself.

It still didn't uncoil all of the knots in her stomach though. Sedgestar strode up to Morningstar, who greeted him with a friendly nod.

"Are your cats in position?" Sedgestar asked, keeping his voice low even though they were still a good distance away from the border.

Morningstar nodded.

"Acornear is heading the other battle patrol. They're keeping an eye on RiverClan from near Fourtrees, but your idea seems to be a good one. Most RiverClan cats are on the river banks this morning, catching fish, swimming and sunning themselves," Morningstar said. "Acornear is waiting on your signal to attack. Is ShadowClan ready?"

"We're always prepared," Sedgestar said with a nod, flicking his tail to gather his patrol to him. "My patrol will head over there now and speak with Acornear. Grovepelt will be leading the patrol on the SkyClan front."

Grovepelt dipped his head briefly to Morningstar. Morningstar nodded back at him.

"Alright, may StarClan light your path Sedgestar," Morningstar said.

"And, yours too," Sedgestar responded. "Good luck."

Without another word, Sedgestar's patrol turned and vanished into the dense undergrowth. The ShadowClan warriors had already said their goodbyes and well wishes back at camp, with their clan-mates that had stayed behind.

Morningstar turned to Grovepelt.

"If you don't mind, may I join you and your warriors?" Morningstar asked. "I'd like to fight in this battle, but I fear that SkyClan seeing me on our 'border patrol' may spark suspicion."

"You are welcome to," Grovepelt said with a nod. "Although ShadowClan will be following my orders."

"Of course," Morningstar agreed, padding closer to the ShadowClan cats. "Should we get into position?"

"Well, first we'd like to borrow your scent," Grovepelt said, his whiskers twitching in faint amusement.

Morningstar blinked in surprise.

"Our scent?" he echoed.

"Yes," Grovepelt replied. "We've done our best to mask our own with vegetation, but we still smell faintly of ShadowClan marshes and pine forests. We will blend in better with your territory if we smelt more of ThunderClan."

"That makes sense," Morningstar said, his brow furrowing slightly. "Er... how do you plan on 'borrowing' our scent though?"

"Having your cats brush their pelts against ours should suffice for our purposes," Grovepelt said with a blink.

Morningstar jerked his chin towards his warriors, who hung back from the ShadowClan cats, their gazes flashing with uncertainty.

"You heard him," he said, and his cats crept over reluctantly.

Frostmask didn't blame ThunderClan for their hesitance. They may be allies, but there was quite a difference between exchanging

friendly nods, and brushing pelts like they were old friends and den-mates.

Frostmask held as still as possible to make things easy for them as the ThunderClan warriors brushed their pelts against the ShadowClan ones. When they pulled away, Frostmask did her best to keep her nose from crinkling up as a strong wave of ThunderClan scent— a deep, musty mixture of leaf-mold and damp ferns, overlaid with an edge of nuttiness— washed over her.

ThunderClan smells so much like their musty forest, I'm surprised mushrooms haven't started growing on their pelts! And, yet the other Clans say that ShadowClan scent is bad?! They've clearly never scented the sweetness of the marsh in full bloom or smelt the clean, clear scent of pine.

The ThunderClan warriors smoothed their pelts down with a few licks as they groomed themselves quickly, removing any faint traces of ShadowClan scent that clung to them. Morningstar nodded at the ThunderClan patrol.

"Go set the new border," he ordered. "We'll shadow you. If SkyClan sticks to their regular schedule today, they should be here at sun-high, but keep alert in case they arrive early. We'll be there backing you up no matter when those fox-hearts get here."

Foxbite, Pineclaw, Barredclaw, and the golden-furred apprentice nodded and turned away to lead them towards the contested territory.

The ShadowClan patrol followed them, keeping themselves well hidden in the bushes and ferns as the ThunderClan cats stalked through the trees, marking the new border as they went, reclaiming their old land. While the ThunderClan cats patrolled, Grovepelt directed their group with paw-signs, fanning them out to flank the ThunderClanners.

Morningstar watched Grovepelt with rapt interest as he flashed signs to the ShadowClan warriors, clearing dying to know what kind of system he was using to silently communicate.

Although paw-signs had originally been created as a means to communicate with Lizardpaw, of course, no cat could have anticipated the value it'd give ShadowClan over the other Clans when it came to stealth missions. No longer were they forced to rely on rudimentary signals or whispered instructions. All they needed was a clean line of sight, and they could communicate with as many details and directions as they could with yowling at each other.

For a while, they made their way through the forest unchallenged, but as the sun reached its zenith, an ominous rustle came from the undergrowth on the SkyClan side of the forest. The ThunderClan patrol froze, Foxbite pulling back from the tree she'd been rubbing her face against as the ThunderClanners' ears swiveled towards the noise.

Next to Frostmask, Lizardpaw tensed, his nose twitching as he scented them before they revealed themselves. The SkyClan warriors stalked out of the dense undergrowth, their pelts bristling and their eyes glittering with fury.

Frostmask's gaze swept over the SkyClan patrol. It was fairly large for a standard border patrol— six warriors and an apprentice, but it made sense that SkyClan would send out large patrols; ThunderClan had been pestering them at this border for several days now. Even with this sizable patrol though, they wouldn't be any match for the number of ShadowClan cats lying in wait. A grey and white tom who Frostmask believed was called Cloudleap was leading the patrol, and behind him Frostmask recognized Larchtail, who was next to Spottedflower from the gathering. The rest of the SkyClan patrol was made up of a black tom, a dark tabby, a ginger warrior, and a dark grey apprentice. Frostmask's paws prickled with nerves as she glanced back at Larchtail. She hoped she'd be able to avoid directly fighting with her.

At least Paledusk isn't also here.

She hadn't totally decided what the best move would be if she met him in battle, besides just trying to avoid him of course.

Grovepelt held the ShadowClan warriors back with a flick of his tail. They would wait first for the SkyClan warriors to attack.

"How many times do we have to teach you this lesson, ThunderClan?" Cloudleap hissed.

The sun-high light was blotted out by the canopy above them, shrouding the forest floor in gloom, but Cloudleap's unsheathed claws still gleamed as he scored them through the leaf-litter.

"Get off our territory and we won't have to tear your mangy pelts off," Cloudleap spat.

"Your territory?" Foxbite hissed incredulously, baring the unusually long canines which had given her her name. "We are just reclaiming what is rightfully ThunderClan's."

"Enough talk," Spottedflower snarled, her tortoiseshell fur fluffed up so much it made her look nearly twice as large. "If ThunderClan wants to get torn to shreds, it'd be my pleasure to oblige them."

ThunderClan released a chorus of defiant snarls and yowls, then in a flash, SkyClan was upon them. Frostmask's shoulders tensed, anxiety twisting tight knots in her stomach. She shot another glance over at Lizardpaw, hoping to make reassuring eye-contact with him one last time. But, Lizardpaw's blue gaze was locked intently on the battle. The ShadowClan patrol held back for a moment longer.

"Attack!" Grovepelt yowled.

Frostmask threw herself forward without thinking, her lips curling back into a snarl as an instinctual battle-cry ripped from her throat.

The SkyClan cats' heads reared up immediately, their eyes widening as they took in the sight of the descending ShadowClan warriors.

"Fox-hearted ambush—" Cloudleap's snarl was cut off as Dampfang tackled him.

Dampfang's green eyes burnt with fury and blood-lust as he wrestled the SkyClan patrol leader to the ground, screeching while he clawed out tufts of fur and tore into flesh.

A wave of alarm swept through the SkyClan patrol, and they shied back. For a moment, Frostmask thought that they'd flee. After all,

ThunderClan and ShadowClan now had the SkyClan patrol outnumbered two to one. But then a dark-furred SkyClan warrior threw his head back, letting out a vicious caterwaul before flinging himself at Barredclaw and Autumnleap, and just like that, the fight was back on.

Frostmask followed Lizardpaw as he hared forward, targeting a ginger SkyClan tom, Mapleflight.

Lizardpaw lunged at him, but Mapleflight's board, muscular shoulders rippled as he sprung straight upwards to dodge. Mapleflight twisted in the air, aiming his paws towards Lizardpaw's back in an attempt to crash down on top of him. Lizardpaw managed to dodge out of the way just in time, and Mapleflight's paws hit empty ground. Mapleflight grunted as he landed hard, and Frostmask took the opportunity to spring forward, clamping a bite on his tail while his back was to her.

Mapleflight released a furious hiss and whipped his head towards Frostmask, wrenching his tail from her jaws as he did so, although he left quite a few clumps of ginger hairs behind. Frostmask was spitting fur out of her mouth as Lizardpaw flashed forward, taking advantage of Mapleflight's distraction to score his claws across Mapleflight's cheek and snap his head to the side in a hard blow.

Frostmask's heart thrummed against her ribs as she and Lizardpaw moved in tandem, circling like a pair of vultures as they took on the SkyClan tom. They'd trained together long enough now that they were completely in tune with one another's methods of fighting and could read each other through the barest glances and gestures. Lizardpaw liked to use his long legs to his advantage, keeping attackers at a distance, which he did so now by barraging Mapleflight with lightning-fast slashes.

Frostmask, though, was much too short and small for her slashes to have the same power behind them as Lizardpaw's did. Instead she relied more on her bites to do serious damage. She flashed towards Mapleflight to sink her fangs into the ankle of one of his hind-legs for an instant before nimbly dodging back, narrowly avoiding a kick to her face as Mapleflight lashed out at her in response.

Lizardpaw kept his gaze locked on Mapleflight the entire time as the three cats prowled around each other. To compensate for his deafness, he tried to never let his enemies leave his line of sight, even if it cost him the use of more complicated moves or poses. Although Lizardpaw's fighting style might be a bit on the simplistic side, he more than made up for it through utter mastery of his technique and his uncanny ability to anticipate his enemy's next move.

Lizardpaw warned Frostmask of that now, his ears rotating to one side.

'To the left.'

Wholeheartedly trusting Lizardpaw's instincts,Frostmask flashed to Lizardpaw's left, her right, stretching a paw out to trip Mapleflight as he surged there that same instant, trying to dart around them. Mapleflight stumbled over Frostmask's leg, but was quick enough that he was able to catch himself instead of sprawling out on the ground. Still that stumble allowed Lizardpaw to land a few more hits on Mapleflight's flanks, and blood-stained ginger strands of fur flew through the air.

Mapleflight snarled and leapt straight upwards again, but this time rather than using the leap as an attack, he simply jumped clean over Lizardpaw and Frostmask, landing a few tail-lengths away next to a huge oak tree. He turned, positioning the trunk at his back so they were no longer able to flank him.

Smart move. Frostmask thought grudgingly.

She and Lizardpaw surged forward, but the fight was now on more equal footing. No longer having to worry about attacks from behind, Mapleflight was able to focus all of his attention forward and unleash his full strength.

Burning pain suddenly ripped across Frostmask's chest as Mapleflight landed a deep slash with his claws. Frostmask flinched back for a moment, blood welling in her pale fur. Lizardpaw slashed at Mapleflight's ears, but he ducked under the blow and surged forward, headbutting Lizardpaw's chest and knocking him off-

balance. Lizardpaw wheezed as he tried to recover from getting the breath knocked out of him, while Frostmask held Mapleflight back alone. Although having the tree behind Mapleflight protected his back, it also limited his movements, cornering him between the trunks and and roots and making it easier for Frostmask to keep him in place while Lizardpaw recovered.

Lizardpaw was back to swiping at the tom only a few moment's later, but Frostmask's attention was pulled away by a squeal of pain. A few fox-lengths away, Cricketpaw had somehow gotten separated from her battle partners and was fending for herself against Spottedflower.

Cricketpaw needs some help. Lizardpaw should be able to manage against Mapleflight alone.

Frostmask flicked her tail against Lizardpaw's flank to get his attention for a moment before jerking her head towards Cricketpaw. Lizardpaw nodded in understanding and shifted over to take sole duty in the fight against Mapleflight as Frostmask turned and dashed towards Cricketpaw and Spottedflower.

Spottedflower had her back to her and didn't notice Frostmask's approach. As Frostmask reached her, she reared back to slam both of her forepaws against Spottedflower's flank, knocking her away from Cricketpaw. Spottedflower whirled towards her attacker, her teeth bared, and rage flooded her gaze as she recognized Frostmask.

"You," Spottedflower hissed.

"Me," Frostmask agreed, shooting a sign at Cricketpaw with the flick of her tail.

Cricketpaw sprung onto Spottedflower's back as Frostmask lunged towards her face. Spottedflower staggered under Cricketpaw's sudden weight, but the strong SkyClan warrior's knees didn't buckle. Still though, with Cricketpaw hindering her movements, Spottedflower wasn't able to defend herself against Frostmask's claws, which she raked over Spottedflower's forehead. Spottedflower hissed again as blood welled in the scratches, some dripping down to her eyes, but instead of going after Frostmask,

Spottedflower whipped her head to the side, sinking her fangs into one of Cricketpaw's ankles. With a strong heave, she ripped the apprentice off her back, flinging her several tail-lengths away.

"Paws off my apprentice, squirrel-face!" A new voice snarled, and Pineshade came sprinting over.

Cricketpaw shook the blow off, stumbling back to her feet as Pineshade reached the fight.

If Spottedflower wasn't such an unbearable fox-heart, Frostmask would've almost felt bad for her. The tortoiseshell dodged and weaved, trying to stay ahead of Frostmask's, Pineshade's and Cricketpaw's attacks, but even the most talented of fighters would find it close to impossible to do battle three on one. Frostmask, Pineshade and Cricketpaw chipped away at Spottedflower slowly—a bite here and slash there, while Spottedflower could do hardly more than dodge them.

Then, for an instant, Frostmask was distracted as Morningstar's voice boomed out across the battlefield.

"They're going to fetch reinforcements! Stop them!"

"I'll do it," a familiar voice growled from much closer to Frostmask.

A dark streak flashed in Frostmask's peripheral vision as Dampfang dived into the undergrowth, hot on the tail of whoever was fleeing the battle.

It all happened only in a matter of heartbeats, but it was long enough for Spottedflower to seize the opportunity.

Pineshade sprung at Spottedflower, clearly anticipating her attack, but Spottedflower managed to dodge her and leap straight at Frostmask.

Frostmask's attention jerked back to her fight, and she tried to duck.

Too slow.

Spottedflower bowled her over, and the two of them tumbling away

from Pineshade and Cricketpaw in a whirlwind of flying fur, but then Spottedflower's powerful hindlegs slammed into Frostmask's side, flinging her off of her and throwing her several fox-lengths away, into the dense undergrowth.

Frostmask groaned as she hit the ground, the impact only marginally softened by the patch of bracken she landed in. She stumbled back to her paws, wincing at the new bruises Spottedflower's kick had left on her side.

Her gaze darted around the ring of ferns around her, expecting Spottedflower to come bursting through to continue her attack. But, no SkyClan warrior appeared. Spottedflower must have been intercepted by Pineshade and Cricketpaw.

Frostmask gave a quiet sigh and rolled her shoulders, trying to loosen her aching muscles.

She'd been thrown to the edge of the fighting, giving her a few moments to catch her breath as well as to survey the battle, at least as much as she could see through the brush and trees. As Frostmask caught glimpses of snarling cats thrashing in the undergrowth, she blinked in shock as she took in the bloody sight.

She'd of course known that ThunderClan and ShadowClan outnumbered SkyClan two to one, but *knowing* was different than seeing.

SkyClan was not faring well. They were overwhelmed and being relentlessly battered from every side. Each SkyClan cat her gaze skimmed over was riddled with deep claw marks and bleeding puncture wounds, however, it was quite a different story for the other side.

Frostmask had only one sizable wound on her so far— the slash Mapleflight had landed across her chest, and it seemed to be mostly the same for the ShadowClan and ThunderClan cats. This wasn't for lack of trying on SkyClan's part though; their cats looked like they were fighting for their very lives. SkyClan warriors slashed toward their opponents' vital areas, necks and bellies, but they were having trouble landing hits on one enemy when more attackers harried

them from other directions at the same time.

With every passing heartbeat, more and more gashes were added to the SkyClan warriors' pelts, and they grew weaker and more desperate, But, they still refused to retreat.

Frostmask searched the scene with her wide-eyed gaze, swallowing hard.

This isn't a battle. It's a slaughter.

Frostmask took in a long, deep breath, steeling herself. No matter how pitiful SkyClan looked right now, she couldn't just stand here and refuse to participate in the battle. They could call a retreat at any time, and ShadowClan and ThunderClan would allow them to go— they were honorable warriors after all. But, until then she had a duty to fight for her Clan.

Frostmask prowled around a bush, heading back towards the battle, but she jolted as she suddenly tripped over something warm and fuzzy hidden by a clump of ferns. Frostmask glanced down, her paw-pads turning clammy. It was the body of a cat, and Frostmask recognized the pattern of the brown tabby fur as Larchtail.

She was lying on her side; her eyes shut. Her body was covered in scratches, and a deep wound on the side of her neck oozed dark crimson blood. Frostmask's stomach twisted as she ducked her head down, trying to tell if she was still breathing.

"Larchtail. Larchtail!" Frostmask hissed in a loud whisper, nudging Larchtail's flank with her paw.

Frostmask released a sigh of relief as Larchtail's flanks twitched under her prodding. One of her ears flicked too, but her eyes did not open.

Frostmask tried poking her a bit harder, but she was careful to avoid jabbing her wounds.

"Get up!"Frostmask ordered in a low voice.

Larchtail moaned, and to Frostmask's relief, her eyes flickered open.

But, when Larchtail's gaze drifted up to meet Frostmask's, she didn't look nearly as relieved to see Frostmask as she was to see her. Instead, first surprise and then anger flashed in her eyes.

"Frostmask!" Larchtail spat, struggling to her paws.

"Shh, frog-brain!" Frostmask hissed, silencing her as she shot a quick few glances around to make sure no cats were watching them, or rushing over to attack.

Luckily for them though, they were in an area sheltered by tall ferns and bushes, concealing them from most of the fighting.

"I'm trying to help. Get out of here! Run!"

Larchtail blinked once in confusion before her gaze flickered away from Frostmask, drifting over the glimpses of the raging battle they could catch through the ferns' leaves. Larchtail's throat bobbed as she swallowed hard. It was impossible for her to not notice the dire straits the SkyClan patrol was in.

"I can't retreat without orders!" Larchtail protested, her pelt bristling.

"You're in no state to keep fighting," Frostmask argued, her mew low and urgent. "And, I doubt my allies are as interested in mercy as I am! So, *please.* Save your pelt and get out of here!"

Larchtail's brow furrowed, and she hesitated. Her tail twitched behind her as her resolve seemed to wane.

Larchtail then opened her mouth to say something else, but a yowl of agony from the fighting cut her off. Frostmask's head immediately whipped towards the noise, cold fear flooding her as she recognized the voice.

Pineshade!

Pineshade stumbled out of the undergrowth in a daze. She staggered around groups of fighting cats without glancing towards them, as if she hadn't even noticed they were there. A constant stream of blood ran down her muzzle and dripped to the ground,

but Frostmask couldn't see where she was wounded until her legs all at once gave out on her.

As Pineshade crumpled to the ground, her face turned in Frostmask's direction. Bile rose up in Frostmask's throat when she caught sight of the place where her left eye was. Or, more accurately, where her left eye *should be*. Because it was gone. Now there was only a gaping, crimson wound. And, blood. *So much blood,* pouring down her cheek.

Frostmask was already dodging around screeching, battling cats before she even realized that she'd left Larchtail's side. Ahead of her, a dark tabby tom was whirling on Pineshade's limp form. His expression raged as he closed in on her, as if intent on finishing her off.

Frostmask doubled down on her speed and threw all her weight against him as she collided with his side. Despite being much smaller than him, she'd gained enough momentum that she was still able to stagger him. The tom stumbled back a few tail-lengths, but instead of rushing after him, Frostmask scrambled back towards Pineshade. She stood over her, planting her paws firmly on either side of her friend's prone form and directed the most menacing hiss she could manage right at the tabby SkyClan cat.

"Don't touch her!" Frostmask screeched at the tom. "Can't you tell she can't fight anymore?!"

The SkyClan warrior blinked once as if stunned, and then outrage flooded his eyes.

"As if you ShadowClan rats don't always go for the throat!" he snarled, his tail whipping behind him. "Cinderpaw was less than a moon into his training, and you all butchered him!"

The SkyClan glanced to the side. Frostmask blinked hard, following the SkyClan warrior's line of sight to a crumpled dark form, and her stomach twisted sickeningly as her thoughts whirled.

That young SkyClan apprentice had been killed? It must have been an accident, right? No warrior in their right mind would go so

ruthlessly after an apprentice that still had kitten fluff behind his ears.

Before Frostmask could even form the words to respond, the SkyClan warrior was in motion— just a brown and black blur in the corner of her vision. Frostmask yanked her attention back towards him, her body instinctually moving, but she didn't have the time to counterattack or dodge. The best she could do was tuck her chin in, curl her back, protecting her neck and her most vulnerable organs...

The SkyClan warrior was bowled over before he could hit her by a pale brown streak. Frostmask blinked once in stunned surprise as Grovepelt pinned the dark tabby to the ground, snarling fearsomely.

"Get Pineshade to safety!" Grovepelt snapped the order over his shoulder before the tom started buckling under him.

Grovepelt had been able to pin the cat with his pounce, but now that they were still, the advantage of the SkyClan warrior's strength and youth became glaringly apparent. He dislodged Grovepelt with ease, who sprung backwards as the dark tabby rose back to his paws. Grovepelt put himself between the SkyClan cat and Frostmask and Pineshade, his tail lashing and his sharp gaze never leaving his opponent.

Frostmask had to force herself to look away from the fight. She desperately wanted to help Grovepelt, but Pineshade needed her help more. Frostmask dipped her head down to assess her and was relieved to see that her flanks were still rising and falling regularly, although their speed was definitely faster than normal. Pineshade was still conscious too— her remaining eye open and wide. But, she was paralyzed by shock. She stared blankly ahead at nothing, her gaze not flickering to Frostmask at all.

"Pineshade? Can you hear me? Can you get up?" Frostmask asked, turning her tone gentle as if she was soothing a kit.

Pineshade blinked slowly, and her gaze drifted over towards her, trance-like. But, when her remaining good eye met Frostmask's, a spark of recognition lit in its amber depths. Pineshade didn't speak, but she dug her paws into the ground, her shoulders heaving and

trembling as she struggled to pull her legs under herself.

Frostmask secured her fangs around Pineshade's scruff and pulled up in an attempt to help her to her paws. Frostmask felt a flash of gratitude that Pineshade took more after Redclaw's small stature than Weaseltail's tall and lanky form. If Pineshade had been as big as either of her brothers, Frostmask would've barely been able to budge her at all. Together, they managed to get Pineshade to her feet, and Frostmask offered her her shoulder for balance as they limped towards the edge of the fighting. Blood continued to pour from Pineshade's face, and Frostmask stared at the wound worriedly. If the flow didn't slow soon, Pineshade would lose consciousness, and after that...

Frostmask gave her head a sharp shake, refusing to consider that possibility.

She guided Pineshade towards the thicket of ferns that she'd found Larchtail in. It would hide Pineshade from the rest of the SkyClan warriors, and Frostmask trusted Larchtail enough that she didn't think she'd attack a cat in Pineshade's state, if Larchtail hadn't taken her advice and already fled of course.

When they reached the ferns though, Larchtail was no longer there. The only indication that she had been was a flattened patch of leaves and a few smears of blood across the ground. Frostmask gently lowered Pineshade to the ground, and then immediately jumped in fear as the ferns behind them rustled. Frostmask whipped around, but sighed in relief to see that it was only Grovepelt. He didn't look too much worse for wear from his fight— only a few new scratches were added to his pelt, but he was hopping on three feet, keeping one of his forepaws off the ground. Frostmask glanced down at his foot, her stomach twisting as she expected to find a terrible wound there, but she was greeted by a small clump of cobwebs instead.

"I found it in a nearby bush. It's not much, but we need to try to stop her bleeding," Grovepelt said, moving around to Pineshade's head.

With gentle paws, her tilted her head to the side so her wound was

angled upwards. Pineshade allowed him to manipulate her without a sound of protest, her flanks continuing to rise and fall in short, shallow breaths. Grovepelt pressed the cobwebs to her face, and Pineshade flinched as it pushed against her wound, but beyond that didn't respond to his touch.

Frostmask stared at Pineshade, deep worry gnawing at her chest.

Why was she barely reacting? Why wasn't she speaking?

Pineshade was the strong one. Pineshade always fought back, either with her words or with her claws. She wasn't supposed to be stunned into silence, her eye open like she was awake, but her pupil blown out, glazed and unresponsive. This sort of thing didn't happen. Not to Pineshade.

"Come here." Frostmask jerked as Grovepelt's firm voice snapped her from her thoughts. "You take over. I need to get back to the fighting."

Frostmask padded over to her deputy, reaching a hesitant paw towards the cobwebs Grovepelt had pressed on Pineshade's wound. Grovepelt moved his paw so she could place hers were his had been, then he placed his paw back on hers to show her how much pressure she should be putting on the wound. It was much firmer than Frostmask expected.

"Aren't I hurting her?" Frostmask gasped, her stomach twisting as she stared down at Pineshade's blank face.

"Stopping the bleeding is more important right now than her pain," Grovepelt responded a bit curtly.

"The cobwebs are already soaked through," Frostmask muttered, swallowing hard.

Grovepelt's tail twitched.

"It's better than nothing," he added in a low voice.

"Can her eye be saved?" Frostmask asked, turning a pleading gaze onto Grovepelt.

Frostmask wasn't surprised when Grovepelt shook his head. She'd gotten a good look at the wound, and it wasn't a minor injury.

"No. I've seen wounds like this before," Grovepelt muttered. "Her eye is gone. The best a medicine cat can do is remove the dead tissue in the socket to try to ward off infection."

Frostmask's mouth turned dry, and her ears flattened against her head. How long could Pineshade last out here on the battlefield, relying only on Frostmask's untrained paws to stanch her bleeding?

"Why are we still fighting?" Frostmask demanded. "One of SkyClan's cats have been killed, at least one other is seriously injured, and Pineshade needs to see a medicine cat, *now*. We've clearly won, can't you call our clan-mates back?"

Grovepelt gazed at her, reluctance in his eyes.

"If it was up to me, I might," Grovepelt said with a small sigh. "But, I'm under strict orders from Sedgestar to not fall back until they call a retreat. Unless the tide turns against us."

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

But, we outnumber them two to one! There is no way SkyClan can win like this. More fighting will just lead to more cats being injured or killed, both their cats and ours.

Cold fear and anger settled in Frostmask's gut.

"You would let Pineshade die just to follow Sedgestar's frog-brained orders?" Frostmask hissed, glaring at Grovepelt with blue eyes that burned with accusation.

Grovepelt blinked in shock. Frostmask could hardly believe that she'd just spoken to him that way herself, but her rational thoughts were rapidly fleeing as instead a pounding certainty that Pineshade was going to die rose up in her.

Frostmask screwed her eyes shut, battering against the fear and panic that raged inside her like a hurricane. Her paws began to tremble as her breath shuddered in her chest.

No... No! Don't take her from me. She pleaded with StarClan, fate, *the world.* Whatever she could make listen to her.

"Frostmask, snap out of it!"

Frostmask felt a sharp jab to her shoulder, and her eyes snapped back open to see Grovepelt glaring at her hard.

"I need you to stay grounded," he said in a firm growl. "That's how you'll help Pineshade, okay? Focus on her. Stop the bleeding. Don't let your feelings overwhelm you."

Frostmask took a few shaky deep breaths and nodded at him, some of her panic ebbing to be replaced by shame. Pineshade was the one who was severely injured. She had every right to be stunned and silent, since she just lost *an eye.* And, yet now Frostmask what was the one losing her grip. What was her excuse?

Grovepelt brushed his tail against her side for a moment in a comforting gesture, his green gaze softening.

"You're okay. It'll be okay," he assured. "But, I need to go back now. Watch over her."

"...I will," Frostmask spoke hoarsely as she found her voice again. "Can you look for Cricketpaw and Lizardpaw? In case they need help."

"Of course," Grovepelt said with a nod.

Then without another word, the deputy turned and dashed off, disappearing into the undergrowth. Frostmask turned her full attention to Pineshade, keeping her paw in place on the wound. Pineshade's good eye had shut, but Frostmask couldn't tell if she'd lost consciousness or had just closed it.

Frostmask's ears jerked up at the sound of beating pawsteps.

"More SkyClan warriors coming!" Leafbreeze yowled the warning.

The new SkyClan patrol screamed out battlecries as they joined the fight, just adding to the chaotic chorus of hisses, growls, and yowls.

Frostmask hunched down, trying to better conceal herself in the ferns as the battle suddenly stormed around her with renewed ferocity. The fur down Frostmask's back prickled as she spotted a flash of long snowy-white fur through the trees. Paledusk was heading the new SkyClan patrol, his green eyes glinting and his lips curled back in a snarl.

The numbers on the two sides now seemed better matched, but the battle was still leaning in ShadowClan's and ThunderClan's favor. After all, most SkyClan warriors in the first patrol had been badly beaten, so they really only had to worry about the new ones. But, some of their cats like Pineshade were too injured to keep fighting, and the rest surely must be growing tired...

Will we have the endurance to drive off a fresh patrol of warriors?

Frostmask jerked in surprise as a snarling tortoiseshell suddenly leapt out of the bushes and rushed towards her and Pineshade. Frostmask sprung to her paws to jump in front of Pineshade, fluffing her pelt out and arching her back defensively, but her attacker slowed and hesitated as they recognized Frostmask. Frostmask blinked, realizing that it was Mottledflame at that same instant. They must have come with Paledusk's patrol.

Mottledflame halted their approach, gazing at Frostmask uneasily from a few tail-lengths away. For a moment, neither of them moved or spoke. It was Mottledflame who finally broke the silence, their ears flicking nervously.

"Have..." Mottledflame began in a low voice before pausing, their eyes darting from side to side as if making sure that no one was watching them. "...Have you seen Larchtail?"

Frostmask's posture relaxed slightly, and she flattened some of her fur. Thank the stars that Mottledflame seemed more concerned about their mate than fighting her and Pineshade.

"Yes. She's okay," Frostmask said. "At least, she was when I last saw her. She's injured, but I told her to retreat from the battle. I hope that's where she's gone."

Mottledflame released a slow breath and nodded, relief flooding their gaze. They cast a glance at Pineshade, their eyes lingering on her wound.

"I hope your friend makes it," Mottledflame muttered.

Then they turned, returning to the battle without attacking.

Frostmask sighed, her shoulders slumping in relief for a moment before she headed back to Pineshade, quickly returning to her wound. Blood was still leaking from it, and Frostmask's stomach churned as worries whispered in her ears that the flow wouldn't stop. Frostmask shook her head sharply, knocking those thoughts away as she reminded herself of Grovepelt's words. She had to stay focused in order to help Pineshade.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she placed her red-stained paws firmly on Pineshade's wound and kept them steady even as blood oozed out around them. The raging battle faded to the back of her mind as she watched over Pineshade, counting the rising of her flanks to reassure herself that she was still alive.

Then a flash of white fur through the ferns shattered Frostmask's concentration. She tensed, the fur down her spine prickling as her gaze slowly drifted from Pineshade and towards the pelt. Anxiety twisted in her gut as she confirmed the cat it belonged to.

Paledusk was standing only tail-lengths away, on the other side of the fern thicket. Frostmask froze as if her body had suddenly rooted to the spot.

Has he seen me? What will he do if he does? Leave me alone like Mottledflame did? Or try to fight? He is always talking about how he admires that we are both loyal to our clans above all else...

Frostmask steeled herself. If Paledusk came after her, she'd meet him in battle. No matter her own feelings on the matter, if nothing else, she had to protect Pineshade.

Still though, it would be better to avoid a fight if possible. She crouched lower, making herself smaller and wishing that she could

will her coat to be brown or black, so she'd blend in better with the undergrowth.

Paledusk's green eyes scanned his surroundings, his gaze cool and clear, and his face expressionless as he assessed the fighting for a few moments. Then his attention drifted towards the ferns, brushing over Frostmask's and Pineshade's hiding place. Frostmask inhaled sharply as his eyes seeming to flash right to her.

Then Paledusk's head whipped around towards the sound of crashing undergrowth from behind him. Leafbreeze and the ThunderClan warrior Pineclaw came barreling out, running straight at Paledusk. Instantly, Paledusk was battle-ready. His formerly neutral expression twisted into a snarl, and he leaned back on his hindlegs, freeing both of his large forepaws to slash at his attackers. Leafbreeze ducked and dodged, but Pineclaw charged straight ahead regardless, slamming right into Paledusk. Pineclaw sunk his fangs deeply into the area where Paledusk's neck met his shoulder, and blood gushed into white fur.

Paledusk barely flinched.

A rumbling growl tore from Paledusk's jaws, and he wrapped his powerful forelegs around Pineclaw in a deadly embrace, slamming the ThunderClan warrior to the earth beneath him. Leafbreeze lunged towards Paledusk, but he kicked out with a hindleg, making solid contact with her flank and throwing her back a few fox-lengths as if she weighed as much as a kitten.

Pineclaw kept his teeth stubbornly buried in Paledusk's shoulder, refusing to release him as he tried to inch his fangs upwards, moving them closer to Paledusk's neck. But, Paledusk didn't give him the chance to bite down on something more vital. With a twist of his neck, Paledusk somehow managed to snake his muzzle around to secure his jaws firmly around Pineclaw's throat. Pineclaw's green eyes went wide, and for a heartbeat, neither cat moved, both keeping the other still with the silent threat to clamp down and sever the life-giving arteries that pounded beneath their tongues.

Frostmask watched the exchange with wide eyes as the heartbeat

seemed to stretch on for seasons.

They're waiting to see who will surrender first.

Pineclaw caved. He jerked, his jaws opening as he freed Paledusk's neck. Paledusk growled, holding on to Pineclaw's throat for a moment longer, and Frostmask inhaled sharply, waiting to see if Paledusk would crush his windpipe. But, then Paledusk finally dropped the ThunderClan warrior.

Pineclaw slumped to the earth, alive, but Paledusk hadn't left his throat completely unscathed. Pineclaw's breaths wheezed as he lay on the ground, air and blood hissing out from the small puncture wounds that Paledusk's fangs had punched into his windpipe.

Paledusk didn't waste anymore time on him, instead he whirled towards Leafbreeze, who had prowled back over towards him, but seemed much more hesitant to engage the SkyClan deputy now that she was fighting alone.

Paledusk wore his blank-faced mask again. Frostmask gazed at him in shock, not comprehending how he seemed to barely acknowledge the deep gashes Pineclaw had left on his shoulder as he and Leafbreeze began to circle each other.

Paledusk struck first, lunging with speed that barely seemed possible judging by his bulk.

Move Leafbreeze! Frostmask silently urged her clan-mate, her stomach twisting.

Thank StarClan Leafbreeze was fast too. She sprung away from Paledusk, avoiding being trapped in his paws, but his claws did make contact. He raked them all the way down her side, from her shoulder to the base of her tail, leaving a long trail of blood in their wake. Leafbreeze darted a few fox-lengths away, and Paledusk followed.

Frostmask's pelt crackled with tension as she craned her head, trying to keep their battle in her line of sight. But then Pineshade suddenly shifted slightly under her paws, letting out a quiet moan

of pain. Frostmask's attention immediately snapped back to her, and she ducked her head down, bringing her face close to Pineshade's. She was still bleeding, but if she was moaning, that must be a good thing; that must mean she was waking up, right?

"Pineshade? Pineshade, can you hear me?" Frostmask asked her, hope stirring in her chest.

Pineshade moaned softly again, but her good eye didn't open.

Frostmask jerked as the earth trembled under her paws as something suddenly slammed to the ground, only a few tail-lengths away on the other side of the ferns, and her gaze flew up. Her chest grew tight as she saw Leafbreeze lying on the ground, struggling to pull herself to her feet as Paledusk rounded on her, stalking forward with cold purpose.

Violent rustling filled the air as a black and orange blur shot out of the undergrowth and towards the two battling cats.

Dappledpelt sprung over her daughter, her lips curling back in a ferocious snarl as she blocked Paledusk's approach with her body.

"Run, Leafbreeze!" she ordered.

Leafbreeze obeyed, scrambling to her paws as blood dripped from her grey-furred side, and she limped off into the undergrowth. Paledusk didn't try to follow her. His sharp eyes just watched Leafbreeze flee for a moment before snapping to Dappledpelt. Dappledpelt's back arched, her tail whipping from side to side in a frenzy.

"You killed Swoopstrike," Dappledpelt spat, her ears flat against her head. "I'm not letting you take my daughter too."

Paledusk was silent, his expression impassive, although he began to pace slowly, his muscles rippling under a white pelt that was splotched scarlet with blood. Dappledpelt glared at him, hatred burning like fire in her eyes. She drew herself up to her full height, uncowed, but numerous wounds already marked her pelt.

Mounting distress tore at Frostmask's chest as she stared at the

scene unfolding before her. What was Dappledpelt doing, challenging him to a fight alone?! She was already injured and tired, while in comparison Paledusk was relatively fresh, not to mention one of the most powerful fighters Frostmask had ever witnessed. Dappledpelt didn't stand a chance one on one against the SkyClan deputy.

I could go over there. Fight with her. Or, maybe Paledusk will even leave her alone for me.

Frostmask's gaze flickered down to Pineshade. She'd stopped moaning in pain, and now she seemed more eerily still and quiet than ever before. But, her flanks still twitched in short, shallow breaths as the gaping wound on her face continued to ooze blood. Frostmask pressed her paws to the wound a bit harder, desperate to stem the tide of the bleeding.

But, Pineshade still needs me!

Hisses and yowls filled the air as Dappledpelt and Paledusk collided. Frostmask's breath caught in her throat as she watched them battle. Thankfully, despite Dappledpelt's blind rage towards Paledusk, still had the sense to be careful as she fought him. Rather than facing him head-on as Pineclaw had attempted, Dappledpelt flashed in and out, landing shallower blows, but dodging most of his his attacks.

Frostmask swallowed hard. As long as Dappledpelt could avoid being caught by Paledusk's paws, she had a chance to beat him, or at least bring the fight to a stalemate. But, it was a risky game. All it required was one mistake on Dappledpelt's part, and she'd be mince-mouse in Paledusk's long, lethal claws.

The misstep came much too soon. Paledusk feinted left and Dappledpelt fell for it, moving right and stumbling when Paledusk kicked out a hindleg to trip her. Paledusk lunged, sinking his claws into Dappledpelt's fur, and in only a heartbeat, had her pinned to the ground.

Dappledpelt screeched, clawing out huge clumps of white fur from his chest and belly, but Paledusk grabbed her wrist in his jaws and

forced her onto her side, directing her slashing claws mostly away from him. Dappledpelt's chest heaved as Paledusk put a heavy paw on her shoulder to keep her in place, his tail held low and thrashing slowly behind him. Dappledpelt writhed and clawed at his legs, but he didn't budge. She was no match for Paledusk's sheer strength.

Frostmask stared at them hard, willing Paledusk to release her.

He wouldn't kill her like he did Swoopstrike. He couldn't. He killed Swoopstrike because they'd invaded SkyClan's camp. But to kill Dappledpelt over this scrap of land?! That wouldn't be right.

Paledusk curled his lips back in a snarl as he loomed over Dappledpelt. Frostmask's heart hammered in her chest.

No!

Paledusk lunged downward. But, instead of going for the throat, his jaws delivered a hard snap to one of Dappledpelt's forelegs. Dappledpelt yowled in pain as he ground his fangs in, mangling her flesh, but then Paledusk was stepping off of her, releasing his jaws and sending her scampering off with a final hiss and slash of his claws down her shoulder.

Frostmask's paws trembled with relief as Dappledpelt limped off, defeated, and Paledusk turned away from Frostmask's hiding spot, diving behind a patch of undergrowth and disappearing from her sight as he entered back into the fray. Dappledpelt, however, looked like she didn't have much fight left in her.

Frostmask understood Paledusk's strategy now. The bite to her foreleg had been deliberate. It was debilitating enough to remove her from ShadowClan's remaining pool of fighting warriors, while not being inherently fatal. But, if Dappledpelt could take over watching Pineshade, Frostmask could take her place and return to the fighting. She wasn't nearly as injured as her.

Frostmask lifted her head, about to call Dappledpelt over to her when a grey streak suddenly shot out of the bushes and barreled straight into Dappledpelt.

The two she-cats tumbled for a brief moment, both snarling, but in only a heartbeat, the SkyClan cat had slammed Dappledpelt to the earth. Dappledpelt glared up at her attacker, her eyes blazing with defiant fury.

Then Frostmask could do nothing but watch as Suneyes ripped through Dappledpelt's throat with a powerful slash of her claws.

A gush of blood splattered across the forest floor, and for an instant, Frostmask was rooted to the spot. Numb shock tingled up through her limbs, and her belly clenched. It wasn't until Suneyes got off of Dappledpelt and stepped around the quickly growing crimson pool that the pain, grief, and fury hit Frostmask so hard that her shoulders slumped as if a heavy weight had suddenly slammed down on her back.

Panting, Suneyes' bright gold gaze darted around as she searched for her next target.

Frostmask trembled with rage and anguish, her eyes on Dappledpelt. But, it was too late; Suneyes' claws had struck too deep. Dappledpelt's flanks twitched for a few moments longer, then grew still. Frostmask clenched her jaws against the yowl of pain and fury that rose up in her throat, her eyes stinging.

Paledusk came dodging back through the undergrowth, new wounds already added to his pelt. He spotted Suneyes and Dappledpelt, although he hardly gave the dead ShadowClan warrior a second glance. Instead, Paledusk quickly summoned Suneyes to him with a jerk of the chin, muttered something to her, to which she responded with a curt nod, and then Paledusk was flinging himself back into the fray. This time, Frostmask had a clear view through the undergrowth, and she saw him charge straight at Morningstar. The leader and deputy clashed together like a thunderclap, and the two powerful warriors tumbled several fox-lengths head-over-tail.

But, then Frostmask's attention shifted back towards Suneyes, and her stomach dropped down to the ground.

The SkyClan warrior had found a new adversary.

Suneyes reared up her hindlegs, bringing her forepaws slamming down towards Grovepelt's head. Grovepelt dodged the hit, but only barely. He was dragging one of his forelegs, which seemed to have gotten torn up rather gruesomely from shoulder to elbow, exposing glimpses of bloody muscle between patches of brown fur.

Frostmask's blood pounded in her ears, obscuring other sounds. Grovepelt would stand no chance against Suneyes in the state he was in. Frostmask's gaze flashed down towards Pineshade and to where her paws continued to cover her wound. The bleeding was finally slowing. But, was that a good thing or was it because her body had run out of blood?

Frostmask's insides twisted so much that she felt sick as her gaze flew between Pineshade, Grovepelt and back again. Who should she help? Grovepelt had ordered her to stay with Pineshade, but how could Frostmask just sit here and watch as Suneyes killed another one of her clan-mates?

If Pineshade's slowing bleeding is a good thing, then she'll be fine if I leave her alone. If it's a bad thing... I can't do anything about that.

Frostmask's gaze snapped back towards Grovepelt, and a gasp tore from her throat as she saw him being barraged by Suneyes. She slashed at him and slashed at him— trying to go for the throat again. But, although Grovepelt's endurance was clearly flagging hard, he had experience and cunning on his side. He was somehow managing to dodge most of her blows, making Suneyes' paws tangle up in bramble patches or slam against tree trunks instead. And, for the few blows that landed, Grovepelt twisted his body in time that they hit his legs or shoulders rather than anything vital. But, Grovepelt wasn't a young cat, and there was only so much beating one body could take. Suneyes was both fresher and stronger than him. Soon enough, she would wear him down. He'd be a fraction too slow with a dodge, and it'd all be over.

Frostmask cast a final glance down at Pineshade before making her decision. After whispering a desperate apology to her friend and sending an equal desperate prayer to StarClan to keep Pineshade alive, Frostmask was on her paws streaking towards Suneyes. She ran past Dappledpelt's body, and then a limp tortoiseshell pelt that

she recognized as Spottedflower, but Pineclaw was gone— he must have had to the strength to drag himself away or had been rescued by his clan-mates— and then Frostmask was at her deputy's side.

Claws stretched out to their fullest extent, Frostmask sprung onto Suneyes back, latching herself onto her pelt and snapping for Suneyes' right ear. She caught it and bit down. Hard.

A hot, metallic tang coated her tongue as the suffocating reek of blood clogged her nostrils, but Frostmask fought the urge to open her jaws. Rather, she clenched down harder, until her fangs ached. Dimly, beneath the dull drum of anger and grief for Dappledpelt that pounded through Frostmask's body, she could hear Suneyes screeching. She writhed under her like a snake, but Frostmask refused to be so easily dislodged. Keeping her jaws firmly closed together, Frostmask yanked her head to the side, slicing half of Suneyes' ear to ribbons as her fangs ripped clean through it.

Suneyes yowled in pain, and giving up on her writhing, she reared onto her hind-paws for an instant before falling backwards, intent on slamming Frostmask to her ground beneath her. Frostmask managed to free her grip on Suneyes' pelt just in time to spring off her, and the SkyClan warrior's back hit the earth, leaving her stomach exposed.

Frostmask lunged forward, slicing her claws down Suneyes' vulnerable underside. But, it was a fleeting blow, and as quick as a bolt of lightning, Suneyes twisted back to her feet, lashing out as Frostmask pulled back and raking her claws across Frostmask's brow, sending droplets of blood running into her eyes.

Blinking the red out of her vision, Frostmask retreated to Grovepelt, protecting his injured side. They would stand a better chance against Suneyes working together.

Suneyes rounded on them, snarling. Her bright eyes glittered with rage as a stream of blood ran down her head from her newly torn ear. She raised a paw to strike—

"SkyClan! Retreat!" Paledusk's voice thundered out.

Suneyes jerked with surprise, her gaze flying towards her deputy. Frostmask's chest heaved with pants as she followed her glance, hardly able to believe it herself.

Was it really all over?

Paledusk stood a couple of boulder-lengths away from them, but his pure white pelt cut through the undergrowth like a beacon. He held his chin high, but blood ran down his flanks from his wounds as SkyClan warriors streamed past him, heading back in the direction of their territory. With a final hiss at Frostmask, Suneyes turned tail and ran towards him, dodging around bloodied ferns and wounded warriors.

ThunderClan had won back their land and ShadowClan had gotten their revenge, but no cat seemed to have the energy to raise their voices in victory. Instead, ThunderClan and ShadowClan warriors just watched the retreating SkyClan cats with eyes glazed with exhaustion.

For the smallest fraction of a heartbeat, Paledusk's gaze met with Frostmask's. But, neither his face nor his body gave anything away as he turned around, back towards SkyClan territory.

Change

The SkyClan and ShadowClan warriors clashed together in a frenzied sea of writhing pelts. As Frostmask gazed into the fray, trying to make sense of the chaotic battle, blood splattered through the air, sending droplets colliding with her face. She winced back, the metallic scent of iron filling her nose.

Frostmask was still swiping blood from her eyes when a sudden screech ripped through the air. Pineshade was pinned to the ground, blood pouring from half her face as a SkyClan warrior closed their jaws around her throat.

Frostmask's heart lurched. Her paws were shooting forward, but not fast enough. With a sickening squelch, the SkyClan cat's jaws clicked shut, slicing open the vital blood vessels that ran through Pineshade's neck. Blood spurted out between the enemy warrior's fangs as Pineshade's one remaining eye rolled back into her skull.

"No!" Frostmask howled, horror and grief clawing at her chest.

She continued to sprint towards them, her feet flying, but somewhere deep, deep down, she knew it was too late.

"No-no-no-no!" she sobbed, her vision blurring.

"Frostmask?"

"Frostmask!"

Frostmask jerked, her eyes snapping open, chest heaving. Autumnleap peered down at her from by her side, his amber eyes dark with concern. He swept his long tail towards her, encircling her flank.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice soft and gentle. "You started twitching and mumbling, and you looked really upset."

Still breathing hard, Frostmask's gaze flickered away from him and over her surroundings, just to reassure herself that it hadn't truly been real.

She was out in camp on a beautiful new-leaf day. The warm sun-high light heated her pelt, and many other warriors were napping serenely, or sharing prey or tongues. The camp looked so peaceful, it was almost impossible to tell that they'd been locked in battle only a pawful of sunrises ago.

Although ShadowClan had failed to raid RiverClan's herbs— through an extremely unlucky chance, they'd been happened upon by a patrol of RiverClan warriors who'd been leaving their camp. Mosspounce had been gravely wounded, and the patrol had been forced to retreat to save her life— Overall, ShadowClan and ThunderClan had still won the battle. The ShadowClan-led fight against SkyClan succeeded, as did the ThunderClan-led fight against RiverClan, teaching RiverClan and SkyClan two vicious lessons.

Although a few worried murmurs about the herb raid being doomed from the start due to Clearstream's, and therefore StarClan's, disapproval rippled through the Clan, most ShadowClan warriors seemed content to rest on their laurels, confident that they'd finally avenged the attack on their camp.

*...But how long until SkyClan and RiverClan decide to avenge **this** attack against them?*

It never ends.

Frostmask gave her head a small shake, pulling herself back to reality.

"Oh thank StarClan, it was just a nightmare," Frostmask sighed, resting her chin down on her paws.

"Want to talk about it?" Autumnleap asked, scooting a bit closer to her so the fur on their flanks brushed.

Frostmask closed her eyes for a heartbeat, the bloody vision washing over her again.

"It was about the battle," Frostmask murmured.

When she glanced up at Autumnleap, he was gazing at her sympathetically.

"About Dappledpelt?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Frostmask's stomach twisted in grief.

Dappledpelt had been the only ShadowClan casualty in the battle against SkyClan.

But, as horrible as it sounded, Frostmask supposed they should count themself lucky only she had died, given the amount of severe injuries some of her other clan-mates had sustained: Mosspounce had lost a lot of blood from her wounds, but managed to pull through. Grovepelt had badly injured one of his forelegs, resulting in a dislocated shoulder. And, Pineshade...

"No," Frostmask said. "It was about Pineshade actually."

Autumnleap nudged the side of her face with his muzzle, trying to cheer her up.

"I'm sure she'll be touched to hear that you care so much that you're having nightmares about her injury," he teased gently.

Frostmask rumbled only a brief, half-hearted purr in response, too preoccupied by her worries to really be amused.

"Do you think she's managing okay?" Frostmask fretted. "I mean losing an eye..."

Autumnleap flicked his torn ear, brushing off her concern.

"She'll be fine! You know Pineshade, she's as tough as flint," Autumnleap assured. "Just yesterday she was bragging to me about how scary it makes her look. She sounded weirdly pleased about it, frankly."

Autumnleap purred, but Frostmask just shifted uneasily.

"But, a lot of that could be an act," she protested. "You know as well as I do that Pineshade hates to let anyone see her when she's actually upset. Besides, you didn't see what it was like when she first got injured. This isn't just another 'cool' scar. It's an eye. Her *eye,* Autumnleap!"

"I know," Autumnleap said, growing serious. "But, what can we do? Eyes aren't going to grow back like fur. We can either tip-toe around the injury and treat Pineshade like a fragile little bird which —if I know anything about her—would drive her mad. Or, help her, and ourselves, accept that this is the new reality."

Autumnleap gave a small shrug.

"She could certainly be more upset than what she's letting on, that's true," he conceded. "But, we should allow her to cope in the way that she feels is best. And, if that's consoling herself with the idea of frightening the fur off of future apprentice generations with her new intimidating looks, then so be it."

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she absorbed his words.

"Yeah... that's a good point actually," Frostmask said, releasing a quiet sigh.

'"Actually?"' Autumnleap echoed, a teasing sparkle appearing in his gaze. "Don't sound so surprised about it!"

Frostmask rolled her eyes but began to purr.

"Well, forgive me for being impressed," she huffed. "It's not often you hear someone else give wisdom on par with Grovepelt."

"Grovepelt? Now you're just flattering me," Autumnleap purred in response, curling closer to her.

Frostmask placed a paw on her chest as if her integrity had just been deeply challenged.

"I would never do such a thing," she said with fake solemness. "It's true. In some sort of miraculous turn of events, you've become very wise."

Autumnleap winked at her mischievously.

"Well you've always been the smart one. So, it's about time that I started pulling my weight in this partnership," he purred.

Frostmask blinked once, growing serious.

"That's not true, you've always contributed," she said. "There've been so many times that I'd have been lost without you."

Autumnleap's gaze softened with affection.

"Aw... Here I was just trying to tease you, but you had to make it all heartfelt," he said, leaning over to nuzzle her neck. "You're far too sweet."

Frostmask purred, twisting her head to brush her cheek against his for a moment.

"Returning to Pineshade though..." Frostmask said, refocusing the conversation as she pulled her face back from his. "I think I want to go see her before sun-high ends and I have to head out on a patrol."

Autumnleap's ears flattened as his expression twisted into a mock pout.

"But, why do you have to go see her *right now?* Stay with me," he whined.

"You could come with me," Frostmask offered.

"And, let Pineshade find out that I actually care?" Autumnleap asked, arching a brow. "I'd never hear the end of it from her."

"Everyone knows that you both care about each other, frog-brain," Frostmask purred.

"Ah, but it's the *illusion* of uncaring that matters," Autumnleap purred. "I've got a reputation to uphold."

Frostmask rolled her eyes again.

"Do you know if anyone's brought her a meal yet today?" Frostmask asked, deciding to just ignore him.

Autumnleap shrugged.

"No clue, but leave it to someone else," he said. "I'm sure one of our clan-mates have. Or will. At some point."

"Autumnleap! She's your sister, and she's injured!" Frostmask scolded, but her tail flicked playfully.

"Clearstream and Elmclaw won't let one of their patients starve," Autumnleap pointed out.

"Oh stop it," Frostmask said, rising to her paws. "I'm going to take her some prey and talk to her for a bit."

Autumnleap's teasing expression faded, and he gazed at her meaningfully.

"Don't worry," Frostmask said, reading his look. "I'm not going to make her talk about how she's coping with injury if she doesn't want to."

"Okay, good," he said, serious for a moment before he wrinkled up his nose in disgust, slipping back into his indifferent act. "Have fun with *Pineshade,* I guess."

Frostmask started to walk away.

"I will," she said from over her shoulder.

He stuck his tongue out at her, and Frostmask swallowed back her purrs as she turned her attention to the fresh-kill pile. The pile was well stocked from the morning hunting patrols, and Frostmask looked over the options carefully before picking out a large skink. Pineshade liked the scaly taste of reptiles, and she should appreciate it even more since they'd been gone all leaf-bare and were now just returning with the warming weather.

Frostmask then turned towards the cave in Clanrock. Grovepelt was sunning himself a little ways from the cave's entrance. Although he

was still recovering from his injury, it had not been as life-threatening as Mosspounce's or Pineshade's were, so he was allowed access to the camp while the two of them were still confined to their nests in the medicine cats' den.

Frostmask paused by Grovepelt to greet him before she entered into the cave.

"How are you doing?" she asked, placing the skink by her paws and giving the deputy a respectful dip of her head.

"Alright," Grovepelt said good-naturedly, shifting his position. "My leg isn't healing as fast as I'd like it, but I'm not as young as I used to be either."

"It's only been a few sunrises since the battle," Frostmask meowed. "Pineshade and Mosspounce are still recovering too. I bet you all will start feeling better soon."

"True," Grovepelt agreed, inclining his head towards her slightly. "Speaking of Pineshade though, I assume you're on your way to see her now?"

Frostmask nodded, and Grovepelt purred in response.

"I'm sure she appreciates the company," he said. "Her personality isn't one inclined for sitting around."

"I know," Frostmask said with a wry twitch of her whiskers. "How has she been lately?"

"Her spirits seem good," Grovepelt said. "But losing an eye will be a difficult adjustment for any cat to go through."

Frostmask's brow furrowed, and she nodded slowly.

"Will you let me know if she seems... I don't know." Frostmask shifted her paws, glancing away from Grovepelt as her voice trailed off for a moment. "I know Pineshade is tough, but it's a lot for a cat to go through. I don't want her to have to do it alone."

Grovepelt lightly brushed his tail down Frostmask's side.

"I know that just you visiting and being here for her already helps tremendously," Grovepelt said, gentle reassurance in his voice.

"But, you'll let me know if things change?" Frostmask insisted, her gaze flashing back to his. "If she needs me?"

"Of course," Grovepelt said.

"Thank you," Frostmask murmured.

Grovepelt nodded, shifting his position, but then winced sharply as he accidentally put strain on his wounds.

"Are you okay?" Frostmask asked, blinking at him with concern. "I can get Clearstream or Elmclaw."

"I'm fine," Grovepelt said, releasing a soft, hissed breath "Paledusk just left some deep wounds."

Frostmask stiffened in surprise.

"The SkyClan deputy is who did that to you?" she asked, trying to make sure her voice didn't seem suspiciously interested. "I thought it was Suneyes."

"Suneyes only came after me once Paledusk left to attack Morningstar," Grovepelt rasped. "The SkyClan deputy is quite a formidable warrior."

Grovepelt frowned slightly.

"I hope my wound has healed enough by the full moon. The next gathering is only a quarter of a moon away, I'd hate to give Paledusk the satisfaction of me missing it," he said.

"Maybe if you're not healed enough yet, StarClan will bless us by making it a cloudy night and the gathering will be canceled," Frostmask meowed hopefully.

Grovepelt purred.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Although, I must admit, I am quite enjoying

not having to organize the daily tasks for the first time in seasons."

Frostmask purred softly, although the thought of Paledusk still nagged at the back of her mind. She pushed it away to deal with later.

"Why is it that Sedgestar is doing all of the organizing himself?" Frostmask asked. "I'm sure someone like Darkpelt would love to help out."

Grovepelt half-shrugged, only using his good shoulder.

"Sedgestar can be stubborn about these sorts of things, but I imagine that he'll get someone to help if I'm recovering for much longer."

Grovepelt dropped his voice and leaned closer to her confidentially.

"Although, between you and me, I think Sedgestar could keep using the practice. It's been a long time since he was deputy, and he hardly remembers how to send out patrols," he whispered, his whiskers twitching with amusement.

"He did try to assign Poolcloud to two different patrols yesterday morning," Frostmask said, a purr rumbling in her chest.

"Exactly," Grovepelt agreed, leaning back and purring.

Frostmask's purr faded as her brow furrowed in serious thought again for a moment.

"About the gathering though... if it does happen, is there anything Sedgestar can do about Suneyes?" Frostmask's claws unsheathed and dug into the ground. "Like how he called out Rabbitstar seasons ago when he tried to attack me as an apprentice. Can he make Fennelstar punish her? The way she struck Dappledpelt down after she'd already been defeated..."

"...Was dishonorable, but not a crime," Grovepelt sighed.

Frostmask's jaw clenched, and Grovepelt swept a perceptive gaze over her, reading her emotions.

"I know," he murmured. "It doesn't sit right with me either, but Dappledpelt still fell in battle. Suneyes didn't sneak into our territory and murder her as she slept. Sedgestar has no grounds to publicly demand retribution against her."

"It still doesn't seem fair," Frostmask muttered, her tail-tip twitching.

"Unfortunately, not much is in life," Grovepelt murmured, his ears twisting back.

Frostmask sighed through her nose, and the both of them were silent for a moment.

"... Well, I should go see Pineshade," Frostmask said, dipping her head to pick the lizard that she'd brought her back up.

Grovepelt nodded.

"Yes, you should," he said. "Thank you for taking the time to visit with me."

Frostmask waved her tail in goodbye, before turning to brush through the ferns that framed the entrance to the medicine cats' den.

"Hello. Pineshade?" she meowed around the skink in her jaws as she poked her head into the dim cave.

The first thing she noticed was that the medicine cats were notably absent from the den. Then her gaze swept over Mosspounce curled up in the back, evidently sleeping, before finally resting on Pineshade's form. She was awake in her nest, and Murmurstep was sitting next to her. Their heads had been leaning close together, both purring as they engaged in some sort of lively, but low-voiced, conversation, but as Frostmask stuck her head into the den, the two she-cats paused and turned to look at her.

"Oh. Hi Murmurstep. I didn't know you were in here," Frostmask said.

"Hi Frostmask," Murmurstep said with a friendly nod.

"Hey," Pineshade said, her uncovered eye brightening. "Is that fresh-kill for me?"

Frostmask's gaze flickered over Pineshade's face. The space where her left eye used to be was now masked in a dressing of herbs and cobwebs.

Frostmask wouldn't ever tell Pineshade this, of course, but it was a bit of a relief to her that the wound was covered. The memory of seeing the mess of blood and gore where a bright amber eye had once been was still enough to turn her stomach, and it felt especially fresh after her nightmare.

"Yeah, if you want it," Frostmask said, stepping properly into the cave. "I wasn't sure if you'd already eaten."

"I had some prey at dawn, but for some reason I'm as starving as a fox again," Pineshade said as Frostmask padded over to her and Murmurstep.

"You deserve to eat as much as you want," Murmurstep declared with a swish of her golden-furred tail. "You're probably so hungry because your body is spending all its energy healing."

"The warm weather is tempting all the prey out too, so there's plenty to go around," Frostmask added. "Right now you practically can't take a step out of camp without trodding on a skink."

Frostmask placed the prey down at Pineshade's paws, and she wasting no time in tucking into the food. As Pineshade ate, Frostmask's gaze flickered from her and to Murmurstep.

"Sorry if I was interrupting anything," she said, recalling how absorbed the two had seemed in their conversation when she'd stepped in.

Pineshade shook her head.

"We were just chatting," she said.

"Yeah," Murmurstep said with a nod. "I should get going anyway. I promised Amberberry that I'd visit her and the kits in the nursery

soon."

Pineshade lifted her head from her meal as Murmurstep rose to her paws and briefly stretched.

"Okay," Pineshade said, swiping her tongue around her muzzle to clean up any stray spots of prey-blood. "Are you going to come back later?"

Murmurstep nodded.

"I'll stop by before going to my nest tonight," she said.

"Good," Pineshade said with a sigh. "It's just so boring lying here with nothing to do all day. It even makes me miss *border* patrols."

Murmurstep's whiskers twitched with amusement.

"And, uneventful border patrols are about as exciting as watching grass grow," she said.

"Exactly," Pineshade growled. "So, you know it's bad."

Pineshade gave her head a small shake as if she was trying dislodge the looming tedium.

"Anyway though, I don't want to waste the time you wanted to spend with your mom and siblings," Pineshade said, waving Murmurstep away with her tail. "Thanks for visiting."

"It's not a waste," Murmurstep assured, a playful glint appearing in her eyes. "You know that if I didn't want talk to you, I just wouldn't do it."

"I believe it," Pineshade said drily. "I don't think Amberberry named you 'Murmur' for your chatty disposition."

Murmurstep nodded, beginning to purr.

"Mosspounce always did enough talking for the both of us," she said, turning towards the exit. "I'll see you later, Pineshade."

"See you," Pineshade responded.

"Bye Murmurstep," Frostmask chimed in.

Murmurstep glanced over at her with a blink like she'd forgotten that she was there. But, her look of surprise shifted to a friendly expression as she nodded farewell to Frostmask before padding out of the cave, her long golden fur billowing around her.

Frostmask watched her go for a moment before glancing over at Pineshade. But, Pineshade wasn't looking at her; rather she'd turned her attention to her fresh-kill, although she was now only picking at it, as if her ravenous appetite had suddenly dissipated. Frostmask settled down in a crouch, taking Murmurstep's spot at Pineshade's side.

"So... Murmurstep sure has been stopping by a lot, huh?" Frostmask commented, watching Pineshade carefully from the corner of her eyes for a reaction.

Pineshade gave a half-shrug before reclining back, taking a break from her meal for the moment.

"Of course she is. Her sister's here," Pineshade said matter-of-factly. "Normally she and Mosspounce are tied together at the tail."

Frostmask shot her a skeptical glance.

"That's funny, because from where I was standing, it'd looked like she was at *your* side. Not Mosspounce's," Frostmask meowed teasingly.

Pineshade arched a brow.

"Mosspounce's sleeping right now. *Duh."*

Frostmask's ears angled back slightly. Of course Murmurstep would visit to see her sister, but Frostmask seriously doubted that was the only reason.

"Come on, you know what I mean," Frostmask said, dropping the teasing.

As soon as Frostmask's tone turned more direct, Pineshade's expression shifted to a guarded one, and she glared at Frostmask, her chin jutting out stubbornly.

"No. I don't think I do," she said.

Frostmask angled her ears towards the exit where Murmurstep had been moments before.

"She's clearly coming here to see you too," she said.

"So?" Pineshade asked, her tail twitching defensively.

Frostmask sighed to herself.

She's really going to make me spell it out then?

"Well, I think that Murmurstep likes you. Like, *really* likes you!" Frostmask said.

Pineshade's ears twisted back, and her good eye flitted away from Frostmask quickly.

"No... we're just friends," Pineshade said down to her paws.

"Maybe that's how you feel," Frostmask said with a soft huff of amusement. "But, I don't think Murmurstep feels the same way. It took me a while to figure it out, since she's shy, you know. But, I'm pretty sure that she's been padding after you for a while."

"That's rich coming from the cat who didn't realize that Autumnleap liked her, until he was forced to hit her upside the head with the information!" Pineshade hissed suddenly, glaring at her from the corner of her eye.

"I— hey!" Frostmask protested, frowning. "With Autumnleap it was... Well, anyway that's not relevant! You're deflecting!"

"Frostmask," Pineshade said sharply, turning her head to stare directly at her again. "We're *just* friends. Okay?"

"Is it because she's a she-cat?" Frostmask prodded. "Because I

thought you—"

"It's not that," Pineshade interrupted, shaking her head. "It has nothing to do with Murmurstep. It's because I already have a mate, frog-brain! Dampfang!"

Frostmask bit back a groan.

"Yeah, and how *is* Dampfang doing?" Frostmask asked sarcastically, rolling her eyes. "You must be catching up a lot with him in the *whole two* times that he's come to visit you while you've been been stuck in this cave for the past quarter moon."

"He's been busy," Pineshade snapped defensively, her shoulder fur bristling.

"We're all busy. But, I'm not your mate, and yet somehow I've still managed to see you more than that," Frostmask argued. "And, Murmurstep practically comes by every morning and evening, as regular as the sun rising and setting!"

"Dampfang shows he cares in different ways," Pineshade hissed, her ears flattening against her head. "He's been training Cricketpaw for me while I've been healing, in addition to Cedarpaw!"

Frostmask sighed but broke eye-contact with Pineshade, hoping it'd diffuse some of the tension and anger that'd started sparking between them like fire at the mention of Dampfang.

"If you need someone to train Cricketpaw, I don't mind taking her out with me and Lizardpaw too. Maybe it'll free Dampfang up so he can stop by to see you more often." Frostmask tried to keep the venom from her voice, but still found herself unable to resist the final barb.

"It's better for Cricketpaw to train with an apprentice on her level," Pineshade grumbled, her tail flipping against the ground with still-obvious irritation. "Lizardpaw is nearly a warrior."

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't come here to make you upset," Frostmask meowed, glancing back over at Pineshade again. "I just don't understand that if you have a choice between Murmurstep and

Dampfang, why'd you pick—"

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," Pineshade growled, cutting her off. "We both know that we'll never agree about Dampfang, so just drop it, okay?"

Frostmask hesitated, glancing back over at Pineshade from out of the corner of her eye. Pineshade scowled at her.

"This is my life, and my choices," Pineshade said firmly. "So keep your muzzle out of it."

"Okay, okay. Fine," Frostmask sighed, conceding. "We don't have to talk about Dampfang anymore."

Pineshade gazed at her hard.

"Or Murmurstep?" she prompted.

"Or Murmurstep," Frostmask reluctantly agreed.

"Good," Pineshade meowed, giving a curt nod of satisfaction, just as the sound of rustling filled the den.

Frostmask glanced over her shoulder to see Mosspounce stirring in her nest, evidently awakened by the sounds of their argument. Mosspounce raised her head, blinking sleep out of her eyes.

"...Murmurstep?" Mosspounce echoed curiously, turning her gaze onto Frostmask and Pineshade. "What about Murmurstep?"

...Uh-oh.

Frostmask's eyes widened slightly, and she glanced over at Pineshade. They exchanged an uncertain look, but Frostmask gave her head a tiny shake, deferring to her.

She did just ask me to stay out of it, after all...

Pineshade's brow furrowed as she tried to come up with some sort of response, but she was either too slow with her excuses or Mosspounce was too good at reading their expressions. As

Mosspounce studied the two of them, recognition flitted across her face.

"Oh..." Mosspounce said, giving a knowing nod. "We're talking about Murmurstep's massive crush on Pineshade, aren't we?"

I knew it!

Frostmask stifled a purr of victory and glanced over at Pineshade to see her response. But, instead of answering, Pineshade just groaned and buried her face in her paws.

As sun-high wore on, Frostmask and Mosspounce tried, and failed, to needle any more information about Pineshade's feelings for Murmurstep out of her, and eventually they turned to different topics of conversation. Then Pineshade was spared any additional scrutiny when Sedgestar's call for a clan meeting rung out through camp, ending their conversation completely.

"I wonder what that's about," Frostmask said, gazing out of the den's entrance.

"Let's go find out," Pineshade said, hauling herself to her paws.

Frostmask widened her eyes at her.

"Are you supposed to be out of your nest?" she asked, rising to her feet as well.

Pineshade rolled her eye.

"All I'm doing is walking out of the den. I think I'll survive," she said drily.

Frostmask led the way out with Pineshade and Mosspounce following. The two of them settled right outside the cave's entrance, where Frostmask bid them goodbye before padding over to rejoin Autumnleap and sit with him instead.

Frostmask leaned close to Autumnleap's ear.

"Later, I've *got* to tell you what I just found out about Murmurstep

and Pineshade," she muttered.

Autumnleap's ears pricked in interest, but he didn't respond, as the clan meeting was starting. Frostmask turned her attention towards Sedgestar.

He was perched on top of the Clanrock like he always was during meetings, but this time he wasn't alone. Clearstream stood on the boulder next to him, while Elmclaw and Grovepelt sat side-by-side at the foot of it.

Sedgestar cleared his throat as everyone settled down.

"I've called you all here today not for my own announcement, but for Clearstream's," Sedgestar said, not wasting time on pleasantries. "She will speak to you."

Sedgestar turned to the medicine cat and nodded, ceding the floor to her. Clearstream strode to the front of Clanrock, and Frostmask's pelt prickled with nervousness.

Clearstream's never called a clan-meeting before. Is it something bad? Has she received a vision or prophecy? Is there some sort of sickness?

"Clan-mates, friends, I come to you today with a difficult but necessary decision," Clearstream began, her pelt smooth and her expression composed. "I am choosing to step down from my role as medicine cat and retire to the elder's den."

Stunned silence met her words. Clan-mates stared up at Clearstream with blank, shocked expressions as if instead of announcing her retirement, they'd just heard Clearstream announce that she could fly.

Frostmask blinked. The thought of Clearstream no longer being their medicine cat was a strange one even to her, but she knew it must be even more incomprehensible for the older cats, most of who couldn't remember a time when Clearstream was not ShadowClan's head medicine cat.

She's been the senior medicine cat for longer than Sedgestar's been alive! What must he think of this?

Frostmask glanced from Clearstream over to Sedgestar to find his expression a stony mask.

He's not pleased then.

"Healing has always been my biggest passion," Clearstream continued. "But, as the seasons have worn on me, I'm finding it harder to complete my duties."

Clearstream gave a rueful twitch of her whiskers.

"Traveling to the Moonstone has become very difficult for me, and now my joints ache even after just spending the day sorting herbs. It has been an honor to serve ShadowClan as your medicine cat, and I shall greatly miss it. But, I know that I'll be leaving you in Elmclaw's capable paws."

Clearstream glanced down at where Elmclaw was sitting at the base of Clanrock, and her blue gaze filled with affection.

"I could've not asked for a better apprentice than him, and I know he will serve ShadowClan faithfully." An edge of amusement entered her mew, and Clearstream purred. "Perhaps even better than I have."

As Clearstream finished her speech, the clan remained still and silent for a few more heartbeats. The first cat to move, oddly enough, was Marshnose, who rose slowly to his paws.

"This doesn't have anything to do with that argument you and Sedgestar got into, right?" Marshnose growled, shooting an accusatory glance at their leader.

Frostmask blinked in surprise at Marshnose's defense of Clearstream.

Were he and Clearstream close? Marshnose hardly seemed to be a particularly spiritual cat, and he was one of ShadowClan's most aggressive warriors— he'd even participated in Sedgestar's patrol to raid RiverClan's herbs! Why was he so bothered by Clearstream and Sedgestar's argument?

Realization hit Frostmask as she glanced at Clearstream and noticed that she and Marshnose had very similar body types. Both were shorter, stocky cats with very long pelts.

Oh... they must be kin then.

For a moment, Frostmask felt an irrational stab of jealousy towards the two. She almost couldn't believe that two cats as different as Clearstream and Marshnose could be loyal and support each other for no reason other than that they were related. It would be nice if she had a connection like that in ShadowClan, but all of her kin were in SkyClan...

Frostmask was abruptly pulled out of her thoughts as Sedgestar began speaking.

"How *dare* you imply that I'd force Clearstream to retire!" Sedgestar hissed, a line of fur down his spine bristling. "I'd *never*—"

Clearstream touched her tail-tip to Sedgestar's shoulder, stilling him.

"Sedgestar did not influence my decision at all," Clearstream meowed. "It's something that I'd been planning since leaf-bare, but I wanted to wait until new-leaf. I couldn't retire when our Clan faced so many threats from both sickness and poison."

Marshnose dipped his head in concession, although Frostmask still spotted a few cats exchanging skeptical glances. Her brow furrowed.

Do cats really think that Sedgestar would make Clearstream retire because she disagreed with his plan to steal RiverClan's herbs?

Sedgestar wouldn't do that... would he? The timing did seem awfully coincidental. But, the vast majority of the time that Frostmask had known Clearstream and Sedgestar, the two appeared to be friends.

"Clearstream warns Sedgestar against raiding the herbs. His patrol fails, and then she steps down?" Frostmask heard Treefur mutter to Greytail from their spot outside the elders' den.

"Does seem like bad timing," Greytail whispered back, her tail-tip twitching. "It may be an omen of disapproval from StarClan against Sedgestar."

"Or, maybe it's just Clearstream punishing Sedgestar for not listening to her," Treefur hissed in a hushed voice. "Why support a clan leader that doesn't listen to her advice? Sedgestar's always been arrogant, but thinking that he's above our medicine cat is too much. Next thing you know he'll be thinking that he's above StarClan themselves!"

Darkpelt's thick tail thumped heavily against the ground, interrupting Treefur and Greytail.

"Enough. Sedgestar wouldn't do that," Darkpelt said in a low rumble, shooting the other elders a sharp glance.

Treefur scoffed but didn't respond.

Frostmask's pelt prickled, and her gaze drifted back up to Sedgestar. Would he disavow the rumors about him that were rippling through the camp? Sedgestar's head and tail hung low, and his tail-tip twitched, but he didn't try to defend himself again as he'd done against Marshnose. Instead, Sedgestar just turned his gaze towards Clearstream.

"ShadowClan honors you and your many seasons of service," he said, his voice even and his expression carefully neutral. "Many StarClan bless you with many more moons of rest."

Clearstream dipped her head to him gratefully, and Sedgestar sprung off of Clanrock without another word, indicating that the meeting was over. Frostmask's eyes tracked Sedgestar as he stalked off towards his den, slipping into the tunnel between the Oak Tree's roots. Emberflower gazed after him worriedly, lifting a paw to follow him, but Grovepelt limped up to her and murmured something in her ear. She nodded and muttered something back in response, and Grovepelt continued on to Sedgestar's den, following the leader inside.

Elmclaw bounded onto the Clanrock to help Clearstream down.

They moved slowly and carefully, Clearstream wincing when her paws flexed too far.

Despite whatever cats think about Sedgestar's hidden agendas, Clearstream isn't lying about her painful arthritis.

Even with the meeting dismissed, most of the clan lingered out in camp, breaking into smaller groups for discussion. Dampfang and Dustleap joined Marshnose, with Treefur meandering over to them as well. Frostmask's ears flicked as she caught fragments of their conversation.

"...No matter what they're saying publicly, it seems strange for Clearstream to retire now, right after the battle, if she wasn't trying to make some sort of statement," Marshnose was saying.

"Everyone knows that Elmclaw isn't as pacifistic as her too," Treefur said. "I wouldn't be surprised if Sedgestar thought it would be convenient for him if Elmclaw was head medicine cat instead. Cause less friction with his plans."

"Sedgestar's decisions have been questionable lately," Dampfang agreed in a low voice. "For the past *season* in fact, ever since the attack on our camp. Look, honestly you all know that I don't care about RiverClan or SkyClan, or about stealing their herbs, personally. But, Clearstream is the mouth of our ancestors and their laws, which have governed our clans for generations. And, Sedgestar going against her wishes is just one more mark in a growing pattern of doubtful behavior."

Marshnose, Dustleap, and Treefur all nodded, gazing at Dampfang.

"First Sedgestar waited too long for us to strike back against SkyClan and RiverClan," Dampfang said, continuing. "We lost so many good cats this winter. If we had fought back earlier, perhaps claimed some of their territory as our own hunting grounds, lives could have been saved. Would Hootflight have died if we could've avoided hunting so near the Carrionplace? Would Fogfur, Buzzardpaw, and Flymask have succumbed to greencough if their bodies hadn't already been so weakened by hunger?"

Dustleap growled softly at the mention of his son, his ears pinning back against is head. Marshnose dug his claws into the ground, and Treefur sighed sorrowfully.

"Sedgestar also never did a thorough investigation as to how SkyClan found out about our tunnel, which led to the attack in the first place!" Dampfang said, his voice rising slightly and his tail starting to lash as he grew more worked up. "That and the rotten pine omen... we could still have a traitor in our midst who gave the information to SkyClan! And, now when we finally did strike back against SkyClan and RiverClan, what do we have to show for it? Only Dappledpelt's death. Sedgestar allowed ThunderClan to claim full ownership of the territory that *our* warriors fought and died to take from SkyClan, in return for not even a measly mouse tail! We took no land, no prey, nothing from SkyClan or RiverClan, *or* ThunderClan!"

His companions growled in agreement, and Frostmask's fur prickled.

How many other clan-mates thought the same way as Dampfang? Frostmask would be lying if she said she'd never challenged Sedgestar's decisions, but she didn't realize that discontent against their leader was growing so strong in their Clan.

"...Earth to Frostmask!" Autumnleap said, prodding her shoulder with a light poke of his paw.

She blinked and glanced over at him. He was gazing at her with a bemused expression, although his whiskers also twitched with amusement.

"Oh, sorry. Did you say something?" Frostmask asked.

"You didn't hear me at all then?" Autumnleap said, rumbling a brief purr. "What were you thinking about?"

"I— Er... Was eavesdropping actually," Frostmask admitted, angling her ears towards Dampfang and his group.

Autumnleap's amber eyes lit up with curiosity.

"Anything interesting?" he asked.

"They're just talking about the meeting," Frostmask reported. "They don't seem particularly happy with Sedgestar."

"Dampfang's not happy with Sedgestar, what else is new?" Autumnleap said drily with a roll of his eyes.

"Yeah... although he seemed particularly vehement about it this time," Frostmask said, her tail flicking.

Autumnleap twitched his ears dismissively.

"But, you know how Dampfang is. He gets his tail in a knot about something Sedgestar does, sulks about it for a bit, and then forgets about it." Autumnleap shrugged. "Half a moon later, the cycle repeats."

Dampfang hasn't forgotten these things though. Frostmask thought, but she didn't try to argue with Autumnleap.

"Anyway," Autumnleap said. "What I had said was, what is it that you wanted to tell me about Pineshade and Murmurstep?"

Frostmask's ears pricked, excitement stirring in her chest as she remembered.

"Oh yeah! They—"

"Frostmask! Autumnleap!" Poolcloud's voice interrupted her as he came running over, his eyes shining. "I have something really important to tell you."

Poolcloud was purring loudly and shifting from paw to paw. In fact, his excitement was so palpable, Frostmask could almost see it crackling off of his black and white pelt like lightning. Autumnleap turned to his brother, studying his agitated state with a curious gaze.

"What's up?" Autumnleap asked.

"Wait. Let's get Pineshade too," Poolcloud said, his eyes darting

behind them to where Pineshade still lingered by the entrance to the medicine cats' den at the base of Clanrock. "Come on!"

Poolcloud hared across camp as if he couldn't bare to move at a pace slower than a sprint. Frostmask and Autumnleap exchanged an amused glance before following him. Curiosity stirred in Frostmask's chest as she padded after him. Poocloud was a generally happy and upbeat cat, but this level of excitement was unusual, even for him.

Autumnleap and Frostmask reached Pineshade, who Poolcloud had stopped from reentering the medicine cats' den. The three of them turned to Poolcloud as he planted his paws firmly in front of them, still purring. Pineshade's tail flicked slightly as if she was annoyed at Poolcloud's overly enthusiastic intrusion, but her inquisitively pricked ears betrayed the fact that she was just as curious about Poolcloud's state as Autumnleap and Frostmask were.

"Alright Poolcloud," Pineshade said. "Spit it out. What's going on?"

Poolcloud purred louder, puffing out his chest and lifting his chin.

"Dewleaf and I are having kittens!"

For a fraction of a moment, no one spoke or moved. Then Autumnleap released a wordless yowl of joy and sprung at Poolcloud, nearly tackling him to the ground in his eagerness to embrace him.

"There's going to be a bunch of little Poolcloud's running around the camp?!" Autumnleap purred, enthusiastically rubbing his face against his brother's. "What's ShadowClan going to do?"

"Pray to StarClan that the kits actually end up like Dewleaf of course," Pineshade answered drily.

She was far more composed than Autumnleap, and she didn't move towards Poolcloud to rub her pelt against his. But, a loud purr still rumbled in her chest, and her shining amber eye showed her true delight. As the surprise of the announcement faded, Frostmask's heart swelled with joy for Poolcloud and Dewleaf.

"I can't believe it!" Frostmask gasped, her throat closing slightly with emotion. "You and Dewleaf are going to be such wonderful parents. Congratulations!"

Autumnleap's embrace of Poolcloud had turned to playful wrestling, but Poolcloud finally managed to disentangled himself from him. His eyes were still bright, though, as he scrambled back to his paws.

"Thank you, Frostmask, for your kind words," Poolcloud said, purring as he shot a pointed look at Autumnleap and Pineshade. "Unlike these two frog-brains."

"What do you mean? Of course we're happy for you too!" Autumnleap protested, his tail flicking playfully as he shook the dirt from their wrestling out of his pelt.

Pineshade nodded in agreement.

"We're just wishing for what's best for your kits," she said, her purr rumbling louder. "You don't really hope that they'll end up like you, right? You'd doom them to that existence?"

"What?! Why can't they be like me? What's wrong with me?" Poolcloud protested, his brow furrowing in mock indignation.

"'What's wrong with you?'" Autumnleap echoed, his amber eyes shimmering with gleeful amusement. "Oh, where to begin!"

"But, why'd you want them to be like you when they could be like Dewleaf?" Pineshade cut in before Poolcloud could respond to Autumnleap, her tail flicking teasingly. "Or, like *me* for that matter? You're naming one after me, right?"

Poolcloud let out a loud, incredulous huff, tossing his head.

"Ha! As if. I think I'd rather chew off my own tail," he said, his eyes gleaming. "It's already going to be hard enough stopping you from corrupting them. There's no way in StarClan that I'm also naming one after you."

Pineshade screwed her face up in offense.

"But, you're naming one after *me,* right?" Autumnleap asked, his eyes round and beseeching.

"No! Not a single one of my kits will be named after either of you annoying furballs!"

Frostmask purred, her chest warm with love and joy as her friends bickered on, but she couldn't shake the quiet sense of melancholy that crept over her too, casting a shadow over her happiness.

New-leaf was the season of beginnings and change, and the cats' lives seemed to reflect that. Things were changing so quickly. Conflict between ShadowClan, and SkyClan and RiverClan was escalating again, but the dynamics within ShadowClan were shifting too. Pineshade was going to learn how to live with the loss of an eye. Poolcloud and Dewleaf were becoming parents...

Then there was the state of the clan's leadership. With Clearstream retired and Grovepelt injured, the weight of the clan fell solely on Sedgestar's shoulders now more than ever. But, would he be able to carry it alone? Discontent in ShadowClan's warriors was already growing, and as much as it pained Frostmask to agree with Dampfang, he was right that the rotten pine omen still loomed overhead.

With all this uncertainty... when this season is over, how much of ShadowClan will be changed forever?

End of Book 2

Ceremonies (Book 3 and Allegiances)

Book 3: Thawing Frost

Frostmask found herself holding her breath as Lizardpaw sprung and twisted, his paws flashing out in a flurry of blows against his opponents.

Her apprentice had grown into a skilled fighter. He was quick, and his long-legged form gave him a reach most cats couldn't match, allowing him to slash at his enemies while keeping his more vulnerable areas safely out of their range. In all of their most recent bouts of training, he'd been able to subdue Frostmask, despite her throwing every trick she knew at him. She no longer stood a chance against him one-on-one; he was simply better than her now.

Frostmask could see Swoopstrike in the way he moved— the speed and elegance as if battle was more of a dance than a fight. She wondered if he'd learned to move like that from her, or if it was an innate part of him, flowing in the blood he and Swoopstrike shared.

At the thought of Swoopstrike, Frostmask's thoughts turned to Dappledpelt, and a pang of grief stabbed in her chest as the not-yet dulled loss rose up in her like a tide.

At least they're together again.

That was the only consolation which brought Frostmask a scrap of comfort. In the moons she'd spent with them, both together and separately, before and after Swoopstrike's death, she'd begun to suspect that Swoopstrike and Dappledpelt had never seemed truly happy without the other's company.

Frostmask blinked, shaking off the grief to focus on what was happening in front of her again. In the dim light of a cloudy

evening and a faint new-leaf drizzle, Lizardpaw was fighting both Yewpaw and Featherpaw in the Burnt Sycamore training hollow, while their mentors watched on in silence, no one allowed to give advice to the apprentices.

They were assessing their fighting skills, for what would, hopefully be, the final time. The three littermates had reached the end of their training, and all of them had turned into effective hunters and fighters.

Lizardpaw had worked especially hard to get where he was now. He'd had a lot of trials to overcome, both internal as he struggled with his insecurities, and external as many cats judged him harshly due to his disability.

It wasn't just that they were worried that his deafness would prevent him from doing certain things— they had entirely different standards for him. If one of his littermates, or another hearing apprentice, missed a catch, it was bad luck. If Lizardpaw missed a catch, it was because he was deaf and incapable of being a successful hunter. Nevermind the fact that he could track scent-trails better than any other cat in the clan and could sense prey digging deep beneath his feet thanks to vibrations and smell alone.

And, as for battle training, Yewpaw and Featherpaw would pass their assessment while fighting together against Lizardpaw, but Lizardpaw had to prove that he could hold them both off by himself.

It wasn't enough for Lizardpaw just to be good. He had to be above reproach.

Frostmask gave her head a small shake to dislodge the sting of anger at the injustice of it.

No matter what frog-brained cats thought, Lizardpaw had trained hard, and he was a contributing member to the clan. In Frostmask's eyes at least, he seemed more than ready to become a warrior.

But, there's really only one cat whose opinion matters here.

Frostmask glanced over to where Sedgestar was sitting a few tail-lengths away from her with Redclaw and Emberflower. She studied her leader's face, but his expression didn't give away any of his thoughts. Sedgestar's amber eyes were half-lidded as if he was on the verge of dozing off, but Frostmask knew much better than to be fooled by his outward appearance. Under his eyelids, Sedgestar's gaze was as sharp and analytical as ever, never leaving the apprentices.

Frostmask turned her attention back towards the mock fight. Lizardpaw ducked one of Featherpaw's blows, her paws just skimming the tops of his ears, but while his sister distracted him, Yewpaw crept around him from behind. Yewpaw was nearly in striking range when Lizardpaw's whiskers quivered as he sensed the vibrations of his brother's footfalls.

Frostmask finally released her breath with a sigh of relief as Lizardpaw dodged back from both of his littermates before Yewpaw could pounce, bringing them back into his field of vision. As Yewpaw and Featherpaw rounded on him, Lizardpaw's head weaved back and forth like a snake, keeping them both in his line of sight.

A warm glow of pride kindled in Frostmask's chest, and she glanced over at Sedgestar again to see if he was as pleased with Lizardpaw's display as she was. But, Sedgestar's impassive expression had not changed. Biting back a stab of disappointment, Frostmask focused in on the training demonstration again.

Yewpaw and Featherpaw worked together admirably, moving as one as they attempted to circle Lizardpaw, and get at least one of them out of his sight again. But, Lizardpaw wouldn't let them flank him. He kept retreating backwards rather than allowing one of them to circle him, and eventually he ended up with the Burnt Sycamore at his back, preventing any attacks from behind. Now forced to face him head on, Yewpaw and Featherpaw took turns harrying Lizardpaw as he fended them back with swift swats.

The fight seemed to draw to a stalemate, and although Frostmask suspected Yewpaw and Featherpaw would wear Lizardpaw down eventually, Emberflower rose to her paws to end it before it could

get to that point.

"I think we've seen enough," Emberflower said, and the apprentices quickly stilled before all of them turned expectant gazes onto Sedgestar like a group of wide-eyed owls.

Frostmask couldn't stop herself from staring at Sedgestar too, searching his face for his thoughts. He'd hardly moved this whole time, as if he was a cat carved from stone.

"Well?" Frostmask asked.

A low purr began to thrum in Sedgestar's throat, and his half-lidded eyes opened fully.

"Well..." Sedgestar said, his amber eyes sparkling as he paw-signed in addition to speaking. "I think I'll be holding three warriors' ceremonies tonight."

Featherpaw threw her head back, letting out a caterwaul of pure delight. Yewpaw lifted his chin, his silver pelt prickling with pride, while Lizardpaw sprung forward, bunting his head against Sedgestar's side first before doing to the same to Emberflower, who affectionately rasped her tongue over her grandkit's ear. Lizardpaw turned to Frostmask, his eyes glowing with victory. A purr rumbled in Frostmask chest, and she leaned forward to brush her muzzle against his.

'I'm so proud of you,' Frostmask told him.

Lizardpaw ducked his head, burying his face in her shoulder fur and purring louder that she'd ever heard him before.

The group departed back for camp; Yewpaw, Featherpaw and Lizardpaw sprinting ahead to find their parents and friends to tell them the good news, while Emberflower, Redclaw and Sedgestar followed a bit more leisurely behind, and Frostmask making up the rear, her paw-steps slow as her mind was occupied.

Although she was deeply proud of Lizardpaw, she could hardly believe that her apprentice had already completed his training. It really wasn't so long ago that she was an apprentice herself, right?

But, she'd already guided a member of a newer generation to warrior status.

ShadowClan needed all of the warriors they could get, that was sure. An uneasy truce had fallen over the forest since the battle between SkyClan and RiverClan, and ShadowClan and ThunderClan, but there was no way it would last. Although Frostmask had not been in attendance, she'd heard that the last gathering had been particularly tense, with threats thrown around by all of the leaders.

At the thought of the gathering, Frostmask's thoughts shifted to Paledusk. Since she didn't go to that gathering, she hadn't talked with him in quite a while. The last time she saw him was at the battle, but the last time they'd spoken was around a moon before that. Although they had originally agreed to meet up at the next new moon, Frostmask had not attended that meeting because it had fallen on the night after the battle. It felt wrong to go speak to him like nothing was wrong when Dappledpelt's death and her other clan-mates' injuries hung so heavily on her mind.

Her tail flicked with a hint of nervousness. She worried that Paledusk was upset with her. Even if he wasn't bothered by their clans fighting, he could be angry that she broke her promise to meet him.

But, Paledusk must have felt the same way, right? His clan faced injuries and casualties too.

Frostmask was suddenly pulled out of her thoughts as voices drifted over to her. Lost in her musings, she no longer had sight of the others in her patrol, but these voices didn't belong to them.

"You missed again?" Dampfang's distinctive voice said from the trees ahead of her.

Frostmask began to change directions, preferring not to run into him, but she paused as Pineshade's voice responded, bristling with defensiveness.

"Its position was difficult."

Frostmask hesitated for a moment longer as she deliberated between leaving them to their argument, or seeing if Pineshade needed her help. The desire to help won out, and Frostmask turned back towards them, their voices becoming clearer as she grew closer.

"You used to be one of the best hunters in the Clan, but now Cricketpaw brings back more prey than you each time," Dampfang said in low tones.

"Good. That means I taught her well," Pineshade shot back hotly.

"You know that's not what I mean," Dampfang growled, impatience creeping into his voice. "What's up with you?"

Pineshade sighed sharply like she was trying to wrangle control back over her irritation.

"I'm just still getting used to hunting with my injury. It makes it hard to judge distance sometimes," she said.

"It's been a moon. Shouldn't you have figured it out by now?" Dampfang asked, an edge of annoyance in his voice.

Pineshade released a wordless hiss, evidently giving up on her battle against her anger.

"Alright, why don't *you* try losing an eye, and then you tell me how long it takes you to adjust?" she spat.

Dampfang scoffed incredulously, but at that moment, Frostmask rounded the trunk of a large pine and came into their view. He and Pineshade were nose to nose, glaring at each other, but both cats stiffened at her appearance and turned to her. Frostmask swept a critical eye over their bristling pelts and twitching tails before her gaze settled on Pineshade for a moment.

Her wound was healing well. The socket of her missing eye had sunken in enough that rather than a gaping hole in her face, there was only a slit where her eye would have been, and the fur on her eyelid had mostly grown back as well, leaving only a few faint scars.

Frostmask turned away from her, instead directing her a cold gaze towards Dampfang.

"Everything alright here?" Frostmask asked him icily, her blue eyes burning into his green ones.

Dampfang curled his lip up, baring his fangs, but it was Pineshade who spoke.

"Fine," she said curtly.

Pineshade stalked away from Dampfang, her pelt prickling, but her aggressive body language softened as she approached Frostmask.

"How did Lizardpaw's assessment go?" she asked.

Frostmask somewhat reluctantly broke off her hostile staring contest with Dampfang to turn her gaze on to Pineshade. But, she couldn't hold on to her annoyance with Dampfang as pride for Lizardpaw built in her chest.

"Excellent," she purred. "Their warriors' ceremonies will be tonight."

Pineshade started to purr as well, her amber eye brightening.

"That's great!" she said.

Dampfang scoffed.

"Cedarpaw can easily match those three with hunting and fighting, but Sedgestar decided to make the deaf cat a warrior instead of him?" Dampfang sneered.

Frostmask's fur bristled, but it was Pineshade who whirled around towards Dampfang first.

"Yes," Pineshade hissed. "Because Lizardpaw passed his assessment, and he deserves it. Cedarpaw is talented, but him and his littermates are more than a moon younger than the others."

Dampfang just glowered at her rather than responding, and Pineshade turned back to Frostmask.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Pineshade said to her, stalking out into the forest and back towards camp.

Frostmask shot a final glare at Dampfang before following, happily letting the dense trunks of the pine trees block him from their sight. As they drew away from him, Frostmask sighed slightly, rolling her shoulders to dislodge the knots of tension that her muscles always gained uniquely by Dampfang's presence. She trotted slightly to catch up with Pineshade, coming to walk at her sighted side, since she knew that she hated it when cats approached her on her blind one.

Pineshade and Dampfang quarreling wasn't an uncommon occurrence these days; things had seemed tense between them for the past half-moon or so. But, the fight Frostmask had just witnessed seemed particularly heated. Pineshade's strategy with an irritated Dampfang was usually to appease him. However, she'd hardly seemed willing to back down this time.

It was a bit of a relief for Frostmask, honestly. It had never felt right to her when the normally so stubborn Pineshade turned submissive and placating to Dampfang. Now, she seemed more like herself.

"Is it just me or is Dampfang being a bit more annoying that usual?" Frostmask asked drily.

Pineshade gave an angry huff, her spiky-furred tail twitching.

"He offered to go hunting with me to help me adjust to having one eye, but then he spent the whole time acting like a condescending frog-brain," Pineshade growled. "He paradoxically treats me both like a kit on her first day out of the nursery, and like I should be able to do everything exactly the same, as I could before the injury. It's unbearable."

Frostmask was quiet for a moment. On one paw, she was unsurprised that Dampfang wasn't being particularly helpful, but on the other paw, she didn't think Pineshade would appreciate an 'I told you so.'

Pineshade should just find someone else to practice hunting and fighting

with. But... when she makes her mind up about something, it's near impossible to change it.

Frostmask decided it was still worth it to try.

"Maybe you should train with someone else," she suggested gently.

Pineshade's ears twisted back.

"Maybe..." Pineshade said with a sigh, and pleasant surprise prickled Frostmask at her hesitant agreement. "I just don't understand why Dampfang can't be *a bit* more understanding about it."

Frostmask's first instinct was to ask what else Pineshade expected from a frog-brain like Dampfang. But, she bit the words back. Berating Pineshade for putting her faith in Dampfang wouldn't help her. Frostmask knew she had to ignore her bias if she wanted to be supportive.

Her brow furrowed, and she was silent for a few moments as she thought, choosing her words carefully.

"I think..." Frostmask began slowly, "that he has high expectations of you. I mean, his high expectations make some sense, you're a great warrior, of course, so you're capable of it. But, also as his mate, your excellence reflects back on him. So, he's being harsh because he wants to push you to be your best, and I think... from his perspective at least, he believes he's helping."

Pineshade's ears pricked and swiveled towards Frostmask in an expression of surprise.

"Are you... being nice to Dampfang?" Pineshade asked incredulously, her eye wide.

Frostmask exhaled a sharp breath.

"Yes. But, it was *really* painful, so don't ask me to do it again," she joked, rumbling a purr.

Pineshade's whiskers twitched in a brief flash of amusement, but it faded just as quickly as her brow furrowed.

"I don't know if he *is* helping, though," Pineshade said.

"I didn't say his strategy was a good one," Frostmask pointed out.

Pineshade's gaze flickered away from Frostmask, turning down towards the ground.

"What if I never get to be as good as he wants me to be?" she muttered. "What if I never meet his expectations again?"

"Then he'd be wrong," Frostmask said sharply, her shoulder fur bristling. "If he can't see your value, then he doesn't deserve your time."

Pineshade purred softly.

"Now *that* sounds more like what I expect from you about Dampfang," she said drily.

"I'm being serious," Frostmask insisted, lightly flicking her tail against Pineshade's flank for emphasis. "Remember how he was when we were still apprentices, and he was a warrior? How he didn't think you were *worthy* of him? But, he was wrong then, and if he starts thinking that again, he'd still be wrong."

Pineshade's uncertain gaze was drawn back up to Frostmask.

"I'm not saying that he will be like it again," Frostmask clarified. "But... it's maybe just something to be aware of, right?"

"I guess," Pineshade sighed, her expression twisting with bitterness. "I just wish I could figure this 'one-eye thing' out quickly, and everything could go back to normal. It's bad enough that Cricketpaw has had to train with Snakeeyes for the past moon. But, she might end up being a warrior before I can hunt or fight properly again at this rate."

Pineshade glared down at the ground and growled softly, her claws unsheathing.

"I feel like a failure of a mentor and a warrior," she grumbled.

"No, you're not!" Frostmask protested. "You just need more practice, that's all. It's only been a moon, and you spent over half that time just recovering from the injury. But, you'll figure it out."

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

There must be other cats in the clan who'd be able to help Pineshade with training.

An idea started to form in Frostmask's mind.

"Maybe you should ask Sedgestar if you could train with Snakeeyes and Cricketpaw. You guys could be like... a mentor-apprentice trio," Frostmask said.

Pineshade shot her a sharp look from the corner of her eye.

"And, would I be the mentor or the apprentice in this scenario?" she asked.

Frostmask's ears flicked. Pineshade wasn't going to like this part of her suggestion.

"...Maybe a bit of both," she admitted.

Pineshade started to scoff, but Frostmask lightly flicked her tail against her flank again.

"Hear me out!" she protested. "You miss training with Cricketpaw, right? This way you'd be able to do that with her— there's still a ton you can teach her. Just because you're learning how to adjust to one eye doesn't mean that you can't go on border patrols with her, or give her advice as she practice fights with the other apprentices, or things like that, right? But, you could also train with Snakeeyes. Remember, she's deaf in one ear. It's not the same as being blind in one eye, of course, but she might still be able to give you some pointers about how to perceive and pinpoint a sense when you've only got one side working."

Frostmask searched Pineshade's expression, but she still looked doubtful.

"It would probably be more bearable than training with Dampfang at least," Frostmask added with a wry twitch of her whiskers.

Pineshade released a soft huff of amusement at that, but she glanced away from Frostmask, turning her gaze forward.

"It's not a terrible idea," Pineshade reluctantly agreed. "But, it's already embarrassing needing to train like an apprentice again. It seems even more embarrassing to train as an apprentice *with* my apprentice."

"But, you're not going to be an apprentice again," Frostmask argued. "You *know* how to do everything already, at least in theory. You just need to practice doing it with one eye. And, there's no shame in getting some help with that."

Pineshade fell quiet as she thought about it, and the two of them just walked in silence for a while.

"If you don't want to train around Cricketpaw, though, that's understandable," Frostmask broke in as the silence stretched on. "You could still help her with her training, but train with a different warrior, instead of Snakeeyes. Now that Lizardpaw's becoming a warrior, I'll have a lot more free-time, and we could go together."

"...Thanks Frostmask. That might be nice," Pineshade murmured finally with a sigh. "I'll talk to Snakeeyes too and see what she thinks about me joining in with Cricketpaw's training... and also if she thinks she could help me too."

Frostmask gently bumped her shoulder to Pineshade's, giving a supportive purr as they reached the camp's entrance. As they emerged from the thorn-tunnel, Frostmask spotted Sedgestar standing near his den at the base of the Oak Tree with Redclaw and Emberflower. He summoned Frostmask to them with a flick of his tail. Frostmask mewed a goodbye to Pineshade and padded towards their leader, following him, Redclaw, and Emberflower into his den for a private meeting.

"Well, you all know why we're here. Let's discuss warrior names," Sedgestar said without preamble, signing for Frostmask,

Emberflower, and Redclaw to sit as they entered the earthen cave.

He turned his attention onto Redclaw first.

"Any suggestions for Featherpaw?" he asked.

Redclaw gave a small shrug.

"I think she'd be pleased with anything as long as it's not something quote-unquote 'boring' like Featherfur or Featherpelt," Redclaw said, an affectionate purr rumbling in her throat.

Sedgestar's whiskers twitched in amusement, apparently not offended that one of his apprentices feared that his naming conventions would be dull.

"Duly noted," he said drily. "Nothing boring. And, for Yewpaw?"

He glanced over at Emberflower. She gave a slow blink, her tail swishing thoughtfully.

"Perhaps something for his strength of spirit?" she said.

Sedgestar's brow furrowed for a moment as he thought.

"Yewheart?" he suggested.

"Like his father?" Redclaw asked.

Sedgestar nodded.

"I'm sure Rowanheart would be pleased to have his son named after him," he said.

"Yew trees are poisonous though," Emberflower pointed out, her brow furrowing. "So, Yewheart may give the wrong idea. It'd be like naming a Foxpaw, Foxheart."

"Good point," Sedgestar conceded, inclining his head towards her. "Maybe something for his appearance then... What do you think of Yewstripe?"

Redclaw let out a sudden huff of laughter.

"Don't think that it's been so long that we've forgotten *your* warrior name, Sedgestripe," she said, rolling her eyes.

Frostmask's ears pricked in interest. She'd never heard her leader called by his warrior name before, although, doing so did seem a bit disrespectful. At least, Frostmask would definitely not appreciate being called Frostpaw or Frostkit.

Sedgestar didn't seem pleased by Redclaw's comment either. The fur on the back of his neck prickled, but when he spoke it wasn't out of offense that Redclaw referred to him by his warrior name. But, rather, out of *defense* of the name.

"So is '-stripe' never supposed to be used again until I die?" he asked, his tail swishing agitatedly behind him and ruffling the moss of his nest. "It's a good name."

"I'm not saying that you can never use the name. All I'm saying is, consider the fact that Yewpaw is your grand-kit. So, naming Yewpaw after Rowanheart honors your son," Redclaw teased, her green eyes bright with mischief. "But, naming Yewpaw after yourself is just plain narcissism."

Sedgestar scoffed.

"Well I don't see you offering any alternatives, Redclaw," he said, shooting her a sharp glance. "The reason I brought you in here was to help me, not to mock me."

Emberflower directed a lovingly exasperated look first at her mate and then her sister, interrupting their fight.

"StarClan, by the way you two are squabbling right now, you'd think we're the ones back in the apprentice den instead of them!" she scolded.

Sedgestar's tail continued to flick in annoyance, but his expression smoothed as he relinquished to his mate. Redclaw, though, kept her chin stubbornly raised, as unapologetic as ever.

Frostmask licked a paw and ran it across her face to try to cover the fact that her whiskers were twitching in amusement from the older

cats' argument.

Is this what they were like when they were younger, growing up together? The apprentices' den must have never been quiet thanks to them!

"...I like Yewstorm," Emberflower finally declared in a tone that left no room for argument.

Sedgestar shot a sidewise glance at Redclaw from out of the corner of his eye.

"Any objections to that?" he asked.

Redclaw shook her head.

"Nope," she meowed. "It's a good name."

"Alright," Sedgestar said, nodding at Emberflower. "Then it will be Yewstorm."

Sedgestar finally turned his attention onto Frostmask.

"And for Lizardpaw?" he asked.

Frostmask lifted her chin, her previous amusement fading as, instead, a solemn emotion settled down on her shoulders.

She didn't need to think or debate about a name for her apprentice. It had lived in the back of her head for a few moons now.

"Lizardstrike," she said.

Sedgestar paused, tilting his head thoughtfully, and the den was silent for a moment.

"A powerful name," Redclaw commented.

Frostmask glanced to her, a little worry twinging in her chest.

"Do you think it doesn't fit?" she asked.

Redclaw purred reassuringly.

"No, it does," she said. "He's fast, clever, strong— a good fit."

"It also reflects his fighting prowess," Emberflower added, nodding. "Not many other apprentices fight against two others in their final assessments."

Frostmask's chin lifted as she preened slightly in pride for Lizardpaw before she turned her gaze back to Sedgestar, waiting for him to make the final decision. His amber eyes met hers.

"For Swoopstrike?" Sedgestar asked.

Frostmask's blinked, bowing her head slightly in confirmation.

"For the both of them," she added quietly, gazing down at her paws. "I wouldn't have picked it, if the name didn't suit Lizardpaw too."

Sedgestar began to purr quietly.

"I like it," Sedgestar said and purr began to build in Frostmask's throat to match his. "It's all decided then?"

Redclaw, Emberflower, and Frostmask all nodded.

"Perfect. I'll hold the ceremonies after sundown," Sedgestar said, signaling their dismissal.

Emberflower remained in the den with Sedgestar while Frostmask followed Redclaw out, but she paused right at the base of the Oak Tree before properly entering camp. The evening was wearing on, but with new-leaf lengthening the days, sunset was still a little ways off. Frostmask swept her gaze across the camp, searching for something to do to kill the time until the ceremony.

Larkfoot and Amberberry sat side-by-side outside of the nursery, watching as Amberberry's three kits, Marigoldkit, Minnowkit, and Mallowkit, tumbled around, splashing through muddy puddles. Dewleaf was outside the nursery too, but she sat further away from the older queens and the rambunctious, muddy kits, sheltering from the drizzle beneath the thorny boughs of the den. Poolcloud was curled up next to her, soothingly grooming her ears. Dewleaf shifted her position to lean further into Poolcloud's side, revealing her

swelling belly; it wouldn't be that much longer until their kits were born.

Frostmask's gaze drifted from them to the stump of the ancient pine that sheltered the elders' den, which was crowded with cats— all of the elders wanted to stay out of the damp weather.

With Clearstream now retired, there were more elders in ShadowClan than Frostmask had experienced ever before. The clan was slowly adjusting to the change. Elmclaw was a good medicine cat, but he didn't command the same reverence that Clearstream did, especially not among the senior warriors who could easily remember back when he was a kit. But, that kind of respect Clearstream had took time to develop, and Frostmask figured that Elmclaw would get there eventually. Most cats liked him at least.

Frostmask's gaze flickered from the elders' den to Elmclaw himself, watching him greet Grovepelt as he exited his den. Frostmask's stomach twisted with unease as her eyes scanned where Grovepelt crouched just inside the cleft in Clanrock that formed the entrance of the medicine cat's den.

Although Pineshade and Mosspounce had moved back into the warriors' den and were allowed light duties, Grovepelt remained in Elmclaw's care. His shoulder wound was healing poorly, and it wasn't helped by the fact that it had become infected. With the aid of Elmclaw's herbs, he'd managed to fight the infection off, but the wound still refused to seal properly. He had a constant bandage of herbs and cobwebs on his upper foreleg to cover the raw flesh, and he seemed more tired than Frostmask had ever seen him these days, as if he barely had the energy to limp around camp when he used to patrol with such vigor.

Frostmask turned in his direction, stopping by the fresh-kill pile to grab two little songbirds before continuing to his nest. Grovepelt purred warmly as he caught sight of her approaching.

"Hi Frostmask, do you need something?" Grovepelt asked, his green eyes brightening as she padded up to him.

"Just coming to see if you'd like some company," Frostmask said,

placing the prey down at her feet. "And, to see if you were hungry."

"Oh, thank you very much," Grovepelt purred. "I'd welcome a meal with a companion right about now."

A purr began to rumble in Frostmask's chest in response, and she pushed one of the birds towards him with her paw before settling down next to him to tuck into her own food. They ate in silence for a few moments, the only sound between them the crunching of fragile bird bones.

"You must be very proud of Lizardpaw," Grovepelt said. "You've both worked hard."

"He more so than me," Frostmask said, her voice warm with affection. "But, yes I am. He'll be a warrior that will make ShadowClan proud too."

Grovepelt nodded, opening his jaws to say something else, but he was interrupted when a tabby head emerged from between the ferns that framed the den's entrance. Frostmask blinked in surprise at the sight of her leader as Sedgestar slipped into the cave.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But, I was hoping I'd be able to steal my deputy away for a bit before the warriors ceremony."

Frostmask's and Grovepelt's conversation had barely started, and Frostmask had only taken a few bites of her bird. But, she dipped her head obediently to Sedgestar, about to pick up her fresh-kill and leave the den when Grovepelt spoke up.

"At least let poor Frostmask finish her meal," Grovepelt said, lightly brushing his thin tail against her flank to still her. "There isn't any rush, and she came here to keep me company. It'd be very impolite to turn her away."

Sedgestar hesitated for a moment like he wanted to protest, but then he nodded and sat down, wrapping his tail around his paws and gazing at Frostmask and Grovepelt. Awkward silence filled the den. Pelt prickling self-consciously, Frostmask bent her head to take a few rapid bites of her food, knowing that Sedgestar likely wanted

her to be done as soon as possible. Grovepelt, however, didn't continue eating. Instead he just levelly met Sedgestar's gaze.

"Have you thought more on my request?" Grovepelt asked.

Sedgestar eyes widened slightly in surprise before his brow furrowed.

"Let's wait a moment to speak about that. I don't think this is something we should be discussing publicly," he said, and Frostmask didn't miss the glance he shot her from the corner of his eyes.

"Why not?" Grovepelt asked, blinking once. "The whole clan will know it soon enough."

A soft, discontented growl rumbled in Sedgestar's throat for only a heartbeat before he was silent again. Grovepelt seemed to take this as Sedgestar's answer. He sighed quietly, but didn't press the issue, instead just bending his head to pick at his food.

Frostmask rose to her paws, having finished her meal with such record speed, even Poolcloud would be impressed.

"Thank you for stopping by, Frostmask," Grovepelt said, breaking the tense silence.

Frostmask dipped her head to him and Sedgestar in farewell.

"Of course," she meowed, backing out of the cave.

She sighed in relief when the wall of ferns closed between her and the den.

Stars, that was awkward! There's definitely something going on between them.

Frostmask turned, trotting away from the Clanrock.

Maybe Sedgestar is just stressed that he's still having to do most of the duties of deputy and leader.

"Hey, Frostmask!" Autumnleap called from where he sat across camp, sharing tongues with Weaseltail and Redclaw.

He waved his tail, gesturing for her to come sit with them.

Frostmask blinked, shaking off the speculation.

Well, whatever it is, I'm sure they'll sort it out.

She padded over to them, a purr of greeting in her throat.

The earlier clouds and rain had completely cleared, as if all of StarClan wanted to be present to watch ShadowClan's warriors ceremony. The moon was only a slender claw in the sky, but the starlight was so bright Lizardpaw's white pelt almost shimmered as he bowed his head before Sedgestar.

"...From this moment on, you will be known as Lizardstrike," Sedgestar spoke and paw-signed, his voice ringing throughout the camp. "StarClan honors your resilience and your determination, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan!"

Sedgestar touched his muzzle to Lizardstrike's forehead, concluding the ceremony.

Pride, warm and joyful, swelled in Frostmask's chest as Lizardstrike took a step back to stand next to the newly named Featherfall and Yewstorm, lifting his chin as his brilliant blue eyes glowed with happiness.

"Featherfall! Yewstorm! Lizardstrike!" Frostmask chanted with the clan as she stomped her paws.

She brought her feet down so hard they ached. But, she wanted Lizardstrike to feel her cheering for him with his paws, while she shouted as loud as she could, as if the strength of her voice and her feet could convey the amount of affection she felt for her former apprentice. She wanted her cry to reach the stars, so Swoopstrike would know what strong cats his kin had become.

Thank StarClan that none of their clan-mates had protested Lizardstrike's warriors ceremony as they had when he'd become an

apprentice. There were still cats that disagreed with him being a warrior, that Frostmask was certain of, but perhaps they had resigned themselves to the fact that Sedgestar refused to be swayed from this path.

Maybe they also knew that if they had interrupted the ceremony, Snakeeyes surely would have launched herself at them, fangs and claws bared. And, I'd be right behind her.

Now, Snakeeyes and Rowanheart were the first to rush to their kits, purring so loud as they twined around them, Frostmask could clearly hear it from fox-lengths away. Frostmask rose to her feet to join them and their other clan-mates in greeting the new warriors, purring as she rubbed her temple against Lizardstrike's before flicking her tail affectionately against Featherfall's and Yewstorm's sides.

The entire clan was on their paws now, either congratulating the new warriors or turning away to return to their own activities. However, before anyone could leave camp or slip back into a den, Sedgestar bounded back up on Clanrock, letting out a quiet yowl for attention.

"Before we end the meeting, there are a few more things that I'd like to address tonight," he said, sitting and wrapping his tail around his paws.

Cats' ears pricked in surprise, and they turned back towards him. Frostmask took a few steps out of the crowd that still surrounded the new warriors and took a seat to watch Sedgestar. The rest of the crowd settled down too, and soon every cat in ShadowClan blinked inquisitively up at their leader.

"This leaf-bare wasn't an easy one," Sedgestar began, giving a soft sigh. "Many good warriors went to join our ancestors in their hunting grounds, and not a single cat here hasn't suffered at the claws of SkyClan or RiverClan during this past season. I know many of you have been feeling stressed and strained... But, we are a powerful and stubborn Clan. The tenacity and mettle of the Great Shadow herself pumps in our blood. Not only have we survived, but now in the peak of new-leaf, the bounty of our lands are

unmatched. Our clan will only grow stronger from here on out."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the clan, and a purr began to rumble in Sedgestar's throat.

"I think it's high-time that we remember all that we have achieved and endured," he said, lifting his chin. "That we celebrate ShadowClan and all the strength we find in ourselves and in our loyalty to each other. So, in honor of that and the coming green-leaf, tonight, let's feast!"

Their clan-mates' murmuring turned to meows of surprise and delight.

"Rowanheart and Beeclaw," Sedgestar said, glancing down into the crowd. "Do you mind passing out some fresh-kill and ensuring that every cat has something to eat?"

The two warriors nodded and padded over to the large fresh-kill pile, where they began distributing the prey.

Not long afterwards, Frostmask found herself nestled next to Lizardstrike and Snakeeyes, munching on a frog as the clan lounged around camp, talking and purring and sharing tongues like it was sun-high, instead after sundown, when ShadowClan should be hunting and patrolling their territory. In the center of camp, Yewstorm and Thornheart sparred for entertainment as cats shouted encouragement and wagered soft feathers for nests, juicy bits of prey, or favors, on who they believed would be the winner.

Near the base of Clanrock, Grovepelt sat with Greytail, the two of them taking turns telling a story to Amberberry's litter. The kits listened raptly, with more attention than they'd give to anyone else, as the older cats weaved legends about massive, mythical cats called tigers that once roamed the forests. They talked of the silent grace the tigers prowled and hunted with, and how ShadowClan were successors to that talent.

As Frostmask gazed around camp, a cozy feeling of comradery settled in her chest.

Sedgestar's decision here was a wise one. He must have felt the cracks forming, beginning to divide the clan into factions, and a relaxing night of fun was an excellent choice to bring ShadowClan back together. Even Dampfang looked like he didn't have anything to say in protest of Sedgestar tonight— instead he was yowling supportively after Cedarpaw as his apprentice raced his sisters around the edge of camp. From next to Dampfang, Pineshade urged Cricketpaw on instead, shoving Dampfang's shoulder playfully, and he purred.

Sedgestar, for all his encouragement of the festivities, wasn't participating himself. He remained crouched on the top of Clanrock, just watching his clan make merry. Frostmask's brow furrowed as she shot an occasional glance up at him.

Although Sedgestar was never the most extroverted cat, she still found his behavior to be a bit strange.

It's almost like he has more to say, but something is holding him back.

As the night wore on, Frostmask's hunch was finally proven correct. The thin sliver of the moon climbed closer and closer to its zenith, and Sedgestar finally cleared his throat and rose back to his paws. Cats came to attention slowly as a lazy ripple passed through the crowd. The chatting died down, the play-wrestling stilled, and eyes turned upward towards Sedgestar once more.

"It makes me so happy to see you all enjoying yourselves," Sedgestar said, his words warm but his tone tight. "But, I have one final announcement to make tonight before the festivities continue."

Sedgestar hesitated, and his ears rotated back.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as his silence stretched on from a slight delay to an uncomfortable pause. A cold feeling of unease started to worm its way into her stomach.

What was wrong with him? Sedgestar was normally much more confident when giving announcements...

The only thing that'd be able to give him such pause would have to be

something bad. Very bad.

Frostmask's slight unease transformed into an impending sense of doom, circling in her mind like a dark vulture. An unbidden memory crept up to the forefront of her thoughts, whispering a reminder of the last time she'd seen Sedgestar this uncertain and off-balance— the night he accused her of betraying ShadowClan.

Frostmask gave her ears a small but hard shake.

No. This can't be like that again... right?

Her dread turned colder, and Sedgestar finally found his voice again.

"As you all are aware, Grovepelt's leg hasn't been healing well," Sedgestar continued, a slight waver entering his voice. "He hasn't been able to take over full deputy duties for around a moon now."

Frostmask couldn't help but feeling a pin-prick of relief as she realized she misjudged the situation. It wasn't about her after all, and now she knew Sedgestar's announcement couldn't be that bad. Yes, Grovepelt was still healing, but he wasn't already a pawstep into StarClan's hunting grounds either. She just spoke with him earlier— he was getting better. Whatever was bothering Sedgestar now, must just be what he and Grovepelt had been arguing about before.

Sedgestar inhaled deeply, closing his eyes for a moment.

"We have come to a difficult but necessary decision," he continued, his amber eyes snapping back open as his tone took on its typical firm and decisive traits again. "Grovepelt has chosen to retire to the elders' den, and I hope tonight can also act as a celebration of his many accomplishments as ShadowClan's deputy."

Frostmask's ears jutted up in shock as soft gasps and murmurs spread through the Clan at the announcement. Frostmask suddenly straightened, worry running down her spine like cold water. She glanced over at Grovepelt. He was still sitting with Greytail and the kits, his chin raised unashamedly.

Although each cat in ShadowClan knew the health issues Grovepelt faced, the announcement still caught everyone off guard. No cat had truly thought that Grovepelt would step down. Frostmask had assumed that if he was planning on it, he would have done is sooner after the battle, or when he first got the infection.

Not now, nearly a moon later.

Frostmask's mouth turned dry, and heavy dread reared back up in her. She knew her emotions had outpaced her rational mind when she had the sudden, all-encompassing urge to flee. It was as if she was in one of those stories that the elders' talked about— how cats could sometimes sense disasters, like earth tremors that'd level an entire forest, before they even happened.

But, she forced her paws to remain still as Sedgestar barreled on, hardly acknowledging the shocked murmurs of his warriors.

"ShadowClan is in need of a new deputy." He spoke brusquely. "I say these words before StarClan so that they may hear and approve my choice. Frostmask will be the new deputy of ShadowClan."

The sounds of crickets chirps and cicada hums from the marsh flooded into the clearing as utter silence fell over the camp. It was as if everyone all at once forgot how to breathe.

Frostmask did, at least. She found her chest too tight— her lungs and paws equally as frozen as frigid cold slowly crept over her, turning her whole body to ice.

Just two thoughts bounced around in her skull:

No. No. No. No. No.

And,

What game is Sedgestar playing at?

Sure, she'd known that this had possibly been coming for a while— Grovepelt had told her, straight to her face, moons ago that Sedgestar was considering her for the position. But, she never let herself think through what it would be like if she was *actually* ever

chosen. It hadn't even entered her mind as a real possibility.

She'd also thought she'd have more time before Grovepelt started thinking of stepping down; time enough to muse on it and actually figure it out. But, up to this point, anytime the concept had drifted into her mind, even for a brief moment, it just made her body tense with anxiety and her head ring. And, maybe that's why she hadn't seriously considered it, because it was more comfortable for her to pretend like it was impossible. But, here she was now, ears ringing, chest tight, stomach twisting, and utterly unprepared.

Why would Sedgestar choose to make her deputy? There were so many other cats he could've picked instead, all of whom probably wanted it more than her, and who weren't half-SkyClan and half-rogue. And, yet he chose *her?* He didn't even trust her! What was he thinking!?

Frostmask forced a deep breath in through her nose, trying to calm her frantic, racing thoughts.

Despite the ringing in her ears and the lack of feeling in her body, the leaden dread she had experienced prior to the announcement was gone, leaving her feeling oddly weightless. She found herself moving, rising to her paws. She took a moment to lick her lips, her mouth dry.

"I accept," she said numbly.

What else could she say? She couldn't say no. She should be honored to serve her clan. Becoming deputy was the greatest achievement a loyal warrior could hope for.

Frostmask clenched her jaw painfully.

But, I don't want it. So, what does that say about me?

"You can't be serious, Sedgestar." The appearance of Dampfang's snarling voice was almost a relief, since it sliced through Frostmask's whirling thoughts, tethering her back to herself. *"Her?!"*

"She is awfully young," Treefur chimed in, frowning slightly. "There are many other, more experienced, warriors who would be good for

the position."

"I was around the same age as Frostmask when I first became deputy, as I'm sure you recall, Treefur," Sedgestar responded, his tone cool. "Do you believe that has negatively impacted my leadership?"

Sedgestar's question was an obvious trap— there was no way for a cat to disagree with him and come out with their whiskers intact. Treefur seemed to know this because his ears flicked in irritation, but he just bowed his head to Sedgestar instead of responding.

Dampfang wasn't backing down so easily though.

"But, she's—" Dampfang cut off abruptly for a moment, but he worked his jaw furiously as he searched for the right words. "But, are you sure she's the right cat for the job? Could a cat who wasn't born here truly ever understand ShadowClan enough to possibly one day be its leader? And, what would the other clans think about us having a rogue-blooded cat for a deputy or a leader? You're inviting hostility and ridicule."

Whispers rose from the crowd, but Frostmask couldn't tell if the voices were in support of Dampfang, or her, or perhaps some of both. She couldn't afford to glance around and figure it out either. Her head was still spinning too dizzyingly for her to do anything but to stare straight ahead. She couldn't even find the words to defend herself from Dampfang.

...If she even wanted to? Although her pelt stung with offense from his words, maybe it'd be for the best if he was able to convince the clan she wasn't fit for the job. It would get her out of it at least.

"Since when have the opinions of the other clans affected ShadowClan's personal affairs?" Sedgestar asked, his fangs flashing in a hint of a snarl. "Would you prefer us to be cowards that bend to the whims of others?"

Dampfang dug his paws into the ground as if physically bracing himself against Sedgestar's words.

"I'm just trying to think of ShadowClan's future," he said stubbornly, his tail lashing behind him.

Grovepelt rose to his paws, lifting his voice above the clan's murmuring.

"It is not a cat's blood that makes them great, but rather their actions. Frostmask has proven herself a devoted ShadowClan warrior, and I am assured she will make an equally devoted deputy."

Grovepelt turned to Frostmask and dipped his head to her.

"She has my support," he meowed.

Frostmask's stomach clenched. Out of all the bizarre twists of the night, that was by far the worst. Receiving that gesture of respect from *Grovepelt,* the most wise and highly regarded cat in all of ShadowClan, felt so, so wrong.

But, his endorsement seemed to turn the tide. The murmurs quieted, and instead a cheer went up for Frostmask. She could hear her friends leading the cry, although Dampfang turned his face away in defiance, and his voice wasn't the only one of her clan-mates missing from the cheer.

"Frostmask! Frostmask! Frostmask!"

She was the new deputy of ShadowClan, and she was utterly miserable.

The Ancient Clans

Allegiances:

Cats outside of Clans:

Deceased: May— a thin, fluffy grey-point she-cat with blue eyes (Former mate: Paledusk. Mother of Frostmask)

Pepper— a small white tom with black flecks and spots in his fur

Leo— a large grey tabby tom with white markings

Lucky— an old, black-and-white she-cat

ShadowClan:

Leader: Sedgestar— a light brown, long legged, tabby tom with amber eyes (mate: Emberflower)

Deputy: Frostmask— a long-furred, grey-point, tabby she-cat with tufted ears, blue eyes, and white paws (mate: Autumnleap)

Medicine cat: Elmclaw— a massive dark tabby tom with green eyes (mate: Beeclaw)

Warriors: Emberflower— a ginger she-cat with green eyes (mate: Sedgestar)

Weaseltail— a brown tabby and white tom with amber eyes and a long tail (mate: Redclaw)

Redclaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat with dark ginger patches and green eyes (mate: Weaseltail)

Kestrelmoon— a pale cream tom (mate: Amberberry)

Dustleap—a light ginger tom

Marshnose— a brown tabby tom with a white muzzle

Snakeeyes— a sleek white she-cat with a blue eye and a green eye (mate: Rowanheart.)

Rowanheart— a ginger tom (mate: Snakeeyes)

Apprentice: Hollowpaw—a mostly black tortoiseshell she-cat

Beeclaw— a black tom with green eyes (mate: Elmclaw)

Thornheart— a brown tabby tom

Leafbreeze— a grey tabby she-cat

Dampfang— a large, sleek-furred black tom with green eyes and a torn ear (mate: Pineshade)

Apprentice: Cedarpaw— a dark brown tabby tom

Pineshade— a spiky-furred black she-cat with one amber eye, and no left eye (mate: Dampfang)

Apprentice: Cricketpaw— a fluffy grey and cream tortoiseshell she-cat

Poolcloud— a large, fluffy black and white tom with amber eyes (mate: Dewleaf)

Autumnleap— a fluffy dark ginger and white tom with amber eyes, a long scar down his belly and a torn ear-tip (mate: Frostmask)

Mosspounce— a pale cream she-cat

Murmurstep— a long-furred pale golden she-cat

Lizardstrike— a long legged, deaf white tom with bright blue eyes

Yewstorm— a sleek-furred, silver tabby tom

Featherfall— a fluffy tortoiseshell she-cat

Queens: Larkfoot— a pale tabby she-cat (mate: Darkpelt)

Amberberry— a fluffy golden she-cat (mate: Kestrelmoon. Minnowkit—a golden she-cat, Mallowkit— a ginger she-cat, Marigoldkit— a pale cream tom)

Dewleaf— a fluffy grey she-cat with blue-green eyes (Mate: Poolcloud. Expecting kits)

Elders: Grovepelt— a pale brown tom with a greying muzzle and green eyes

Clearstream— a long-furred light grey tabby she-cat with blue eyes (retired medicine cat)

Darkpelt— a massive black tom with one lame foreleg (mate: Larkfoot)

Treefur— a dark brown tom with poor eyesight

Greytail— a grey she-cat

SkyClan:

Leader: Fennelstar— a pale brown tom with bushy fur

Deputy: Paledusk— a white tom with long, sleek fur, tufted ears, green eyes, and a scarred face

Medicine cat: Swallowfur— a blue-grey she-cat

Warriors: Cloudleap— a long legged grey and white tom

Brokenbranch— a ginger tom with a bend in his tail

Apprentice: Flypaw— a black tom

Doepelt— a light brown tabby she-cat

Apprentice: Galepaw— a grey tabby tom

Poppyfur— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Mapleflight— a dark ginger tom

Stormfang— a grey tom

Yewstalk— a dark brown tabby tom

Larchtail— a light brown tabby she-cat with a nicked ear (mate: Mottledflame)

Aspenbreeze— a grey she-cat

Oakflight— a grey tabby and white tom

Mottledflame— a beautiful tortoiseshell cat with striking markings and hazel eyes (mate: Larchtail)

Sootpelt— a black tom

Queens: Suneyes— a grey she-cat with bright golden eyes and a torn ear (Hawkkit— a white and grey tom, Blizzardkit— a mostly white tom with tabby paws, Birdkit— a tabby she-cat with white markings)

Elders: Birdstrike— a heavily scarred, pale grey and white she-cat with dementia

RiverClan:

Leader: Willowstar— a grey tabby, sleek-furred she-cat

Deputy: Perchpelt— a brown tabby tom

Medicine cats: Pebblestripe— a dark grey tabby tom

Hailberry— a white and grey she-cat

Warriors: Violetfur— a black she-cat

Stoneripple— a grey tabby tom

Waterwhisker— a fluffy ginger and white she-cat

Heronfur— a brown tabby tom

Reedheart— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Sandpelt— a pale ginger she-cat

Ospreyscar— a brown and white tom with a long scar down his side

Rainspot— a dappled black and white she-cat

Turtleshell— a brown and white tom

Murkfoot— a black tom

Otterfang— a dark brown she-cat

Finchfall— a pale ginger tom

Ivycreek— a tan and cream tortoiseshell she-cat

Queens: Wavepelt— a grey she-cat with long, wavy fur (Volekit— a black tom, Dovekit— a grey tabby she-cat, Drizzlekit—a white she-cat with few grey patches)

Elders: Fishtail— a white and grey tom with a long tail

Sleekclaw— a nearly blind, once beautiful tabby she-cat

ThunderClan:

Leader: Morningstar— a large, pale grey tom

Apprentice: Boulderpaw— a grey tom.

Deputy: Acornear— a brown tom with small ears

Medicine cat: Fallowtuft— a pale brown and white tom

Apprentice: Squirrelpaw— a brown tabby tom

Warriors: Pineclaw— a dark brown tom with a big rip in one ear

Beechfur— a brown tabby tom

Fernclaw— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Birchtail— a grey and white tom

Juniperfrost— a grey and cream tortoiseshell she-cat

Apprentice: Cloverpaw— a grey tabby she-cat

Foxbite— a ginger she-cat with unusually long fangs

Barredclaw— a dark brown tom

Screechfang— a dark brown tabby tom

Duskfall— a black she-cat

Seedstorm— a tortoiseshell she-cat

Brackenstep— a golden she-cat

Queens: Nettlepelt— a dark grey she-cat with spiky fur (expecting Acornear's kits)

Elders: Pearnose— a dark brown tabby she-cat (retired medicine cat)

WindClan:

Leader: Rabbitstar— a light ginger tom with large ears

Deputy: Wheatfur— a golden tabby she-cat

Medicine cat: Falconpelt— a brown tabby tom

Warriors: Thrushleap— a tan tabby she-cat

Apprentice: Pigeonpaw— a grey and white she-cat

Tumblefox— a ginger tom

Oatbreeze— a tortoiseshell and white she-cat

Volefur— a pale grey tom

Pounceclaw— a black tom

Nighteyes— a black and white she-cat with blue eyes

Stormcloud— a grey tabby and white tom

Eagleflight— a golden-brown tom

Lavenderfoot— a grey and cream she-cat

Deerleap— a grey tom

Ryefur— a tan tom

Harestrike— a brown tabby and white tom

Honeystorm— a tan tabby and cream she-cat with spots of white

Queens: Wheatfur (Heatherkit— a golden she-cat, Swiftkit—a grey tom, Mudkit— a brown tabby tom)

Elders: Slatepelt— a grey she-cat

Endless Duty

"Frostmask. *Psst.* Frostmask."

Frostmask's eyes blinked open blearily, weak, grey light filtering into the den. Autumnleap gazed down at her, his face shadowed in the gloom.

"Huh? What time is it?" Frostmask asked, lifting her chin from her paws and yawning widely.

"A little after sunrise," Autumnleap informed her, his ears twisting back slightly.

"After sunrise?!" Frostmask echoed, her sleepiness immediately chased away as she sprung to her paws. "Snake-dung, Autumnleap! I'm so late with assigning patrols!"

Frostmask made a bee-line for the den's exit, despite the fact that her pelt stuck up in unruly clumps. Frostmask twisted her neck to try to flatten a patch of fur on her shoulder with a few frantic licks as she walked.

Even though it was a bad look to be so disheveled, it seemed even worse to take the time to groom and show up to patrol assignments even later than she already was. Frostmask winced. She could already picture the senior warriors' disapproving glares.

The den was mostly emptied out by now, except for a few cats who were catching up on sleep after staying out late into the night hunting. Frostmask glanced over her shoulder at Autumnleap as she hurried out of the den.

"How long have you been awake?" she hissed in a hushed voice, sweeping a glance over his suspiciously well-groomed pelt. "Why didn't you wake me sooner?"

"Because you were up way past midnight patrolling!" Autumnleap protested, his brow furrowing stubbornly as he trotted behind her. "You've been doing so much lately; you're practically running yourself ragged. You deserved to sleep in a little bit."

"But, I need to assign patrols!" Frostmask growled, her tail sweeping from side to side. "You shouldn't just decide that I need a break, for me!"

"Our clan-mates are grown warriors! Can't they figure out sorting themselves into hunting and border patrols for *one* morning?" Autumnleap asked, rolling his eyes.

They emerged from the warriors' den to be greeted by a rather crowded camp. Frostmask's pelt burned as many of her clan-mates leveled judgmental gazes at her.

"Evidently not," Frostmask muttered to Autumnleap.

He had the decency to at least look a bit sheepish as Frostmask hurried over to the large crowd. Dustleap glanced at her as she approached, and he scowled, his ears twisting back.

"Letting WindClan get the drop on marking the borders this morning, huh?" he asked, his tail-tip twitching.

From where he sat at Dustleap's side, Dampfang narrowed his eyes at Frostmask.

"They've probably moved the whole border past the tree-line at this rate," Dampfang said with an eager hiss as he joined in.

"This is why Sedgestar shouldn't appoint a cat straight out of the apprentices' den as deputy," Marshnose muttered below his breath from the back, his voice quiet, but just loud enough for Frostmask to hear. "She can't even get up before sunrise."

Dustleap grumbled an agreement.

Frostmask stiffened, squaring her shoulders as anger sparked on her pelt.

I'm young, but not straight out of the apprentice's den! I've already trained an apprentice to a warrior, for StarClan's sake!

She clenched her jaw against the words though. She suspected that if she tried arguing with them, it would only confirm their suspicions of her immaturity.

I need to show them that I'm above their little comments. Then ***they'll*** *seem like the immature ones.*

"Relax," Autumnleap huffed, his neck fur bristling slightly as he came to Frostmask's defense. "We haven't had a skirmish with WindClan in moons."

"Still, Rabbitstar doesn't seem the type to waste an opportunity," Dampfang hissed back.

A growl began to rumble in Autumnleap's throat, but Frostmask silenced him with a flick of her tail against his side.

"Redclaw, will you grab a few cats and take a patrol down the ThunderClan border?" Frostmask asked, forcing her voice to be calm as she ignored Dampfang.

Redclaw nodded, and Frostmask was grateful that she, at least, would not try to question her. Redclaw summoned Weaseltail, Leafbreeze, Snakeeyes, and Cricketpaw to her, the five of them padding off towards the camp's exit.

"Emberflower, can you lead one hunting patrol, and Beeclaw, do you mind taking out another?" Frostmask said, glancing over at them.

She knew that as deputy, she shouldn't have to *ask* her clan-mates to take out patrols, but it still felt wrong for her to order the older warriors around. Emberflower and Beeclaw nodded, seeming fine with their tasks anyway.

Autumnleap swiped his tongue over Frostmask's ear in a quick goodbye as Beeclaw summoned him to join his patrol with Rowanheart, Hollowpaw and Mosspounce. Frostmask tried to let go of her annoyance with him for not waking her earlier as he padded

away.

The number of cats around her was dwindling now as most of the warriors left on their patrols. Finally, Frostmask turned back to Dustleap and Dampfang.

"Dustleap and Dampfang," Frostmask said. "Since you two seem the most concerned about WindClan, why don't you pick some cats to take a patrol down their border? I trust that you'll be able to keep any rabbit-chasers that you come across in line, if they have been sniffing too close to our scent-markers."

Frostmask was quite pleased that her voice came out mild, despite the fact that irritation towards the toms still lingered quite close to the surface beneath her pelt. She also mentally praised herself for coming up with such a diplomatic response to their complaints—this way, hopefully, they didn't feel as if she was belittling their concerns, but she would also get them out of her fur and on a long patrol down the border.

Frostmask felt a prickle of relief as Dustleap nodded to her, acquiescing to the task. But, Dampfang scoffed quietly, making Frostmask stiffen again.

"Actually, I was planning on taking Cedarpaw battle training this morning," Dampfang said, his lip curling up in a slight sneer. "He's taking his warriors assessment soon, so his skills need to be in prime shape."

Frostmask clenched her jaw, biting back a hiss.

Then why didn't you already take him out? What are you still doing here, waiting around for me?!

Frostmask knew the answer to that already: just to get under her skin.

"Alright," Frostmask said tightly. "Get on that then."

Dampfang's muzzle wrinkled up as if Frostmask had just told him to go eat crowfood, but Frostmask turned away from him before he got the chance to respond, quickly striding across camp like she had

some place important to be. Really, she was just looking for some sort of quiet, secluded corner where she could finally groom her pelt in peace.

As she reached the opposite side of camp, she glanced over her shoulder to make sure that the warriors were following her requests. Dustleap had joined up with Marshnose and Thornheart, and Dampfang trotted up to the three of them with Cedarpaw trailing behind. The five cats left the camp together, leaving Frostmask frowning slightly.

Is Dampfang going on their patrol then? Or is he just walking with them for now?

Frostmask shook her head to dislodge the thoughts. She didn't particularly care if Dampfang went on the border patrol or went to go train Cedarpaw, as along as he was doing *something* useful. But, it would be just like him to say that he was doing one thing, but do something else, just to make things more difficult for her.

He's blatantly questioning my authority.

Concern prickled at Frostmask's paws. It wasn't a secret that Dampfang, Dustleap, and Marshnose were three of the strongest dissenters against her appointment to deputy, and they were friends too, who often patrolled together. So far Frostmask had been leaving it to patrol leaders to pick their companions for their groups — that's the way Grovepelt had always done it, and it seemed unfair to not let cats spend their days with their friends and kin. But, maybe by doing that, Frostmask was just letting their dislike towards her grow stronger as they spent everyday muttering to themselves about her incompetence, reenforcing the idea. Would it be better if she split them up and put them in different patrols?

Or would that just make them hate me even more for forcing them apart?

Frostmask shook her ears, closing her eyes and swallowing back a groan. Her head already hurt from thinking about all these stupid internal clan politics, and with the gathering tonight—her *first* gathering as deputy—she would have to begin thinking about

external politics too.

The thought was so exhausting, it made her almost want to just curl up in her nest and go right back to sleep.

"You look a bit lost, friend."

Grovepelt's voice cut through Frostmask's thoughts, and her eyes flickered open. The former deputy was sitting out in front of the elders' den in a patch of sunlight that had fought its way through the overcast sky. He blinked warmly at her as Frostmask glanced at him.

"Is it that obvious?" Frostmask drily responded to Grovepelt.

He purred, sweeping his tail over the patch of dirt by his side.

"Come here. Take a seat," he said.

Frostmask figured that next to Grovepelt was as good a place as any for her to groom her pelt, so she obeyed, trotting over to him and sighing softly as she sat down. She twisted her head, finally beginning the task of flattening her sleep-ruffled fur.

"Tough morning?" Grovepelt asked.

Frostmask sighed heavily again, pausing her grooming.

"No different than *every* morning for the past half-moon," she said, despair creeping into her voice. "No one listens to me, Grovepelt."

"Hm. Well, I'm not sure about that. Because from my viewpoint over here, I thought I saw everyone leave camp, just like you told them to," he said mildly, his green gaze kind.

Frostmask glanced over at him out of the corner of her eye.

"No one *respects* me then," she huffed quietly. "Was it like this for you? When you first became deputy? Did they question your every decision? Or, think that someone else could do the job better?"

"ShadowClan cats always have been, and always will be, extremely

independent," Grovepelt said, blinking thoughtfully. "It is ShadowClan's nature to question and challenge. Our cats respect power, but that respect is not given with conditions. If it is given blindly, then we are no better than dogs, blindly following the will of a master."

Frostmask's brow furrowed, her tail swishing behind her.

"So you're saying that I need to prove myself worthy of their respect?" she asked slowly. "Show them that Sedgestar made the right choice?"

Tension knotted in Frostmask's muscles.

But, how can I do that when even I'm not convinced of that? I don't even really want to be deputy!

Frostmask closed her eyes for a moment, struggling to retain her composure as a wave of stress flooded over her, the responsibilities of her new position pounding against her back, shoving her under.

Grovepelt must have read the distress in her expression because he softly brushed his tail against her flank.

"He did make the right choice," Grovepelt said, gentle but firm. "You are an extremely competent cat. You're more than up to the task."

Frostmask swallowed hard.

"I think everyone wishes you were still deputy," she rasped quietly.

Grovepelt was silent for a moment.

"Do you know why Sedgestar made me deputy?" he asked. "I was older— more experienced to balance out his nativity as a young leader. I was organized, detail-orientated, happy to focus on the minute details of keeping ShadowClan running while Sedgestar dealt with bigger picture—the politics and battles and alliances."

Frostmask's eyes flickered open again, and she met Grovepelt's gaze.

"I was a *practical* choice," Grovepelt said. "I was a prop to hold up Sedgestar as he gained his footing as the leader of ShadowClan. And, I was happy with that task. Knowing how much older I am than Sedgestar, I was under no delusions that one day I'd be leader."

Frostmask shook her head.

"You were more than just a practical choice," she insisted. "You're Sedgestar's mentor. He loves you, and he trusts you with his own life, and the lives of every cat in the Clan. That's why you were made deputy. I think he'd have been happy if you'd become leader."

But, he doesn't trust me, and I don't trust him. Frostmask thought glumly. *Just another reason why I'm bad at the job.*

Grovepelt shook his head.

"I was never meant to be Sedgestar's successor," he said. "Not like how you could be."

Frostmask sighed. Grovepelt's words just added another stone of weight to the pile pressing down on her back.

Successor?! I can't even manage being deputy!

Frostmask dearly hoped that Sedgestar had many, many lives left. What if he died in a tragic accident tomorrow, making her leader?! She hadn't even considered that before! Oh StarClan, what would she do?!

To avoid responding to Grovepelt, Frostmask went back to her task of grooming. Flattening her anxiously prickling pelt with a few swipes of her tongue made her feel a bit better, even if it didn't make the source of her problems go away.

Grovepelt let them sit in her silence. He always seemed to know how to not push too hard. Once Frostmask finished her grooming, she rose back to her paws.

"Give it time," Grovepelt assured her before she could walk off. "You will adjust, and so will everyone else. And, you can always come to me if you're in need of help or advice."

Frostmask dipped her head to him.

"Thank you, Grovepelt," she murmured. "I just wish..."

That things were easier. That cats like Dampfang didn't hate me. That Sedgestar trusted me. That I wasn't made deputy at all.

Grovepelt blinked up at her questioningly, but her words got stuck in her throat.

"...Thank you," was all she managed to mutter again, before she turned and padded away, her head hanging low.

Sunhigh came and went. Dustleap's patrol returned, reporting everything quiet on the WindClan border, and Frostmask set out to organizing the evening patrols, reminding everyone to be back early so they wouldn't miss Sedgestar calling the gathering patrol.

The brightest part of Frostmask's evening assignments came with sending Lizardstrike out on a hunting patrol. So far, the only thing Frostmask truly liked about being deputy was how adorably excited and proud Lizardstrike was for her. He treated everything she tasked him with as if it was a grand quest given to him by Shadowstar herself. He was also partly the reason that Frostmask tried to keep her chin held high as she went about her duties. Admitting that she hated the role felt the same as disappointing him.

Cats went off to their duties with slightly less complaining this time, since Frostmask had been sure to be punctual with these assignments. Frostmask was standing near the thorn tunnel, watching most of her clan-mates filter out of the camp, feeling slightly better about her job, when Pineshade approached her.

Frostmask blinked at her in a friendly greeting.

"Hey, Pineshade, what's up? You need something?" she asked.

Pineshade let out a soft huff of laughter.

"Yeah frog-brain, *you.* Let's go hunting," she said, her ear flicking with eagerness.

Frostmask froze, her eyes widening as the slight confidence she'd been feeling in herself vanished just as quickly as it came. Pineshade gazed at her, her twitching ears stilling as she read her expression.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Pineshade asked in a low voice.

"Snake-dung! I'm so sorry, Pineshade," Frostmask said, her ears flattening against her head. "When I said that I'd help you with your hunting this afternoon, I totally forgot that the full moon's tonight! I don't have time for a hunt. Sedgestar wants to meet with me soon, so we have time to talk about ShadowClan's plan for the gathering before we leave."

Pineshade shrugged.

"It's fine," she said, her tone even. "You're busy, I get it. We can just go hunting a different day."

Frostmask studied Pineshade's face with an intense gaze, trying to figure out if she was being truthful. But, Pineshade's emotions were hard to decipher, hidden behind a smooth, indifferent mask that was almost as good as Sedgestar's.

"Are you sure?" Frostmask asked. "I feel really bad. Do you want to go to this gathering? If you want, I can ask Sedgestar. I'm sure he'll let you go."

"It's *fine,"* Pineshade insisted again, sounding more irritated by the second. "Like I said, you're the deputy now, so you have more things to do than the rest of us. I'll just hunt by myself today."

Frostmask's belly prickled with guilt at the thought of forcing Pineshade to go alone, when it was clear that she'd been looking forward to this hunt with her.

"You don't have to go by yourself," Frostmask protested, quickly glancing around camp, and her gaze was drawn to a golden pelt. "Oh! I know, Murmurstep is here. I didn't assign her to any patrols this evening, why don't you go hunt with her? *Murm—!"*

Pineshade smacked her tail over Frostmask's mouth, cutting her off

before she could finish calling her over.

"Shh!" Pineshade hissed in a hushed voice, her amber eye suddenly blazing with intensity. "No. Not Murmurstep."

Frostmask ducked away from Pineshade's tail, her brow furrowing.

"What? Why not? Why not Murmurs—"

Frostmask couldn't even finish her name before Pineshade was lunging at her, clamping one of Frostmask's ears in her jaws, and dragging her by it towards the camp's exit.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" Frostmask protested as Pineshade tugged her through the thorn tunnel and out of camp, only releasing her ear when they were a good couple of tree-lengths away from the thorn barrier.

Frostmask shook her head hard, her ear still stinging slightly from Pineshade's grip.

"What the stars was that!" Frostmask hissed, glaring at Pineshade. "You do realize that I outrank you now, right? I could have you on dirty moss duty for a moon for that!"

Pineshade gave an incredulous snort, taking a seat and smoothing down her whiskers with a few swipes of her paw.

"Oh yeah? Do it then," Pineshade said with a calm blink, clearly seeing the empty threat for what it was.

Frostmask released another exasperated hiss but didn't rise to Pineshade's challenge. She gave her ears one final shake.

"Seriously, are you going to tell me what it is about Murmurstep that's got you acting crazier than a mad dog?" Frostmask demanded. "Did you two have some sort of falling out or something that I don't know about?"

Pineshade shifted her weight, an uneasy slant to her ears.

"No," she said, setting her jaw without elaborating.

"Then why don't you want to go hunting with her?" Frostmask prodded.

Pineshade cleared her throat, her ears starting to flick awkwardly.

"Well... if what you said a while back about her feelings for me are true, I don't want to send the wrong idea by spending a lot of one-on-one time with her," Pineshade explained stiffly.

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"Okay weirdo..." Frostmask said, earning a sharp glare from Pineshade in response. "You didn't have to drag me out of camp just to tell me that. Do want makes you comfortable, but I think you're being a bit overly cautious. It's pretty clear that Murmurstep knows where you two stand—as in, you're mates with Dampfang and not interested in being romantically involved with her..."

Pineshade's gaze flitted away from her for only a moment, but it was enough to send a sudden bolt of intuition rocketing through Frostmask's body. Frostmask stiffened and gasped quietly, drawing Pineshade's attention back to her. Pineshade's eye immediately narrowed as she took in Frostmask's stunned expression.

"Unless..." Frostmask said, her voice barely above a whisper, "you *are* interested in being romantically involved with her, and that's why you're avoiding her?"

Pineshade's eye widened as her ears pinned back.

"What?! No, I'm not," she growled, glaring at Frostmask so fiercely, Frostmask was surprised that her pelt didn't spontaneously catch fire.

But, Pineshade's fervent denial just crystallized Frostmask's hunch into certainty.

"Oh StarClan, you *are!"* Frostmask gasped, her tail curling up in delight. "You *do* like her!"

"Frostmask, *shut up!"* Pineshade hissed, baring a hint of her fangs.

"No! We have to talk about this!" Frostmask said, but she retreated a safe few paw-steps away from Pineshade in case she tried to pounce at her again. "Does Dampfang know? Is that why you're avoiding Murmurstep? Is he *making* you stay away from her?"

"Dampfang doesn't know anything, and it will stay that way," Pineshade hissed, digging her claws into the ground.

"So, there is something to know?!" Frostmask demanded.

Pineshade heaved a dramatic sigh, rolling her eye.

"No!" Pineshade growled, shaking her head as irritation rippled off of her pelt in waves. *"StarClan...* It's nothing, truly! Just a dumb crush. I haven't done anything. No one knows anything. Besides you now, thanks a lot. I just want to stay away from her until it goes away."

"Well dragging me out of camp by the ear just because you panicked when I said her name, probably wasn't the most subtle move if you wanted to keep it a secret," Frostmask teased with an amused chuff.

"It's better than you shouting it across camp for the whole clan to hear!" Pineshade fired back, snarling.

Frostmask met her eyes, and Pineshade glared at her hard.

"This changes nothing," Pineshade insisted. "And, you will tell no one."

"Of course I won't," Frostmask said, some of her glee fading in the face of Pineshade's continued hostility. "You can trust me, you know that."

Pineshade's tail twitched behind her.

"Okay. It's just that you've made yourself *pretty clear* in the past about which of those two cats you'd rather see me end up with," Pineshade said in curt, clipped tones.

Frostmask's ears twisted back, a tiny bit of hurt appearing in her

chest.

"You think I'd tell Dampfang to try to break you two up? Even when you asked me not to?" Frostmask asked.

Pineshade sighed, her gaze flickering away from Frostmask's upset expression and to the ground.

"Don't look at me like that," she protested softly. "It's no secret that you two hate each other. Why shouldn't I think that you'd try to hurt him, if given the chance?"

Frostmask took a few steps closer to Pineshade, stretching her neck forward to brush her muzzle against her cheek for a moment.

"Because I'd *never* do it at the expense of hurting you," Frostmask emphasized, blinking solemnly. "I'm not going to lie and say that I'd rather you stay with him, but I won't meddle. Your secret is safe with me."

Pineshade's gaze flickered back over to her, and she sighed softly.

"Alright. Thank you," Pineshade said. "...I do feel a bit better now that I've told someone."

"And, now I can make sure that you don't end up on the same patrols," Frostmask added. "Although, if you don't want Murmurstep to find out, I'm sure she'll notice you avoiding her sooner rather than later."

Pineshade shifted her paws.

"It's not forever," she protested. "Just until this dumb crush goes away."

"Yeah. It's a shame Murmurstep isn't more ugly," Frostmask teased with a quiet purr.

Pineshade rumbled a purr in response, but Frostmask's attention was drawn away from her and up to the sky. The sun was already dipping closer to the tops of the trees.

"I better go," she said, taking a step away from Pineshade and back towards the camp. "I'm supposed to meet with Sedgestar right about now."

Pineshade flicked her tail.

"Well go on then, *deputy,"* she meowed, a light sarcastic edge to her voice as she said the title. "I'm just going to go head off on my hunt now like a good little warrior."

Frostmask's eyes slitted suspiciously.

"You *are* mad at me for forgetting, right?" she said. "You kept saying that you're fine, but I can tell that you're mad."

Pineshade released a sharp huff.

"Ah, I understand why Sedgestar made you deputy now. It must be for your *stellar* powers of deduction," she drawled, sending Frostmask a snide, sidewise glance out of the corner of her eye.

A soft growl rumbled in Frostmask's chest at her taunting, but there was no real venom behind it. Honestly, she probably deserved a bit teasing in punishment for forgetting.

"Snake-heart," Frostmask sniffed.

"Frog-brain," Pineshade shot back.

Pineshade turned away, starting to trot off into the forest.

"Oh and by the way," she said, glancing back at Frostmask from over her shoulder. "I accept your bribe. Tell Sedgestar to pick me for the gathering."

Frostmask nodded.

"I will," she said.

Pineshade flicked her tail before bounding off, and Frostmask turned the opposite way, heading back through the thorn tunnel and into a quiet camp. She padded straight for the leader's den,

pausing for a moment by the hole in the roots.

"Sedgestar?" she called.

"Enter," came his response, echoing out through the tunnel.

She slipped into the tangle of roots, twining through the short tunnel for a moment before it opened up into the dim, earthen cave where Sedgestar was waiting.

"Hello, Frostmask. Come in," he said, waving her inside the den with a swish of his tail. "We have much to discuss before the gathering."

Frostmask's paws lingered at the threshold of the cave for a moment longer before she crept inside the cavern.

She still wasn't used to meeting with Sedgestar alone in his den. It stirred up the memory of the first time she'd met with him like this — his unruly fur, his distrustful eyes, and his snarling fangs as he blamed her for SkyClan's attack on their camp.

Then she blinked, and she saw Sedgestar for as he was now; sitting peacefully with his tail wrapped around his paws, his amber eyes friendly and bright.

"How have you been finding your new role?" he asked.

Frostmask hesitated just one heartbeat more before taking a seat.

"It's been okay," she said carefully.

She wondered how to best express the struggles she'd been having with some of her clan-mates without coming across as incapable. Her ears flattened slightly.

Does he know I assigned patrols too late this morning? I could not tell him, but also I wouldn't be surprised if Dampfang, or someone, already tattled to him about it. So, maybe I should just confess?

Sedgestar gazed at her evenly in silence as he waited for her to continue.

"But, I think some cats definitely still don't like that I'm deputy," Frostmask said. "So they can make things, um... a bit difficult."

"Would you like me to speak to anyone in particular?" Sedgestar asked with a calm blink.

The fur on Frostmask's shoulders rose.

StarClan, no! That'll just make things worse. Then they'll say that I'm no better than a kit, needing to run to Sedgestar for everything and hide behind his tail!

"It was partly my fault today," she amended quickly. "I woke up late this morning, so I didn't assign patrols on time."

Sedgestar's head tilted slightly to the side.

"So, you're handling it?" he asked.

"Yes," she meowed with a nod. "I also spoke to Grovepelt today, and he gave me some good advice. I feel much better about it now."

That was only half true, but Sedgestar looked pleased.

"That's very good," he said. "Grovepelt will have much wisdom to offer you in these coming moons as you grow into the role."

Frostmask nodded, and a beat of silence filled the den. Frostmask glanced away for him for a moment, shifting her paws as she tried to muster the courage to ask the question that'd been burning in the back of her mind since the day that he'd named her deputy.

"Sedgestar..." she began again hesitantly. "I know we have important things to discuss about the gathering, but there's something that I've really been wanting to ask you... why did you choose me as deputy?"

She glanced back up at him in time to see him blink once, his amber eyes thoughtful.

"You've got a good head on your shoulders," he explained simply. "You're insightful. Compassionate, but not naive. You have the

ability to lead, but also know when to delegate. These are all good qualities for a deputy."

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"But, the others are right when they say that I'm young and inexperienced," she said. "And, there are many other cats who fit those categories, both my age and older. Like... Weaseltail. Why didn't you pick him for deputy? Oh, or Emberflower?"

"But, your youth was part of the reason why I chose you," Sedgestar interjected, his brow furrowing slightly. "I may not yet be the age of an elder, but I'm not a young warrior anymore either. If I picked a cat my age, by the time I lost my last life, and they became leader, they'd be quite old. Or, even worse, if I picked a cat my age, they could die shortly before me, leaving an inexperienced deputy in charge when I did die. I don't want to take that risk."

Sedgestar gave a wane purr.

"That's what happened to me, and I'm convinced that the only reason ShadowClan survived the first few seasons of my leadership is because we were blessed to have Grovepelt as my deputy, guiding me. I'm not going to count on any future leaders being as lucky as I was. That's why I need to take a young warrior as deputy now, not later."

"But, couldn't you still die in a tragic accident tomorrow?" Frostmask insisted, flexing her claws with concern. "What would I do then?"

Sedgestar shook his head.

"That's very unlikely. I have several lives left. I will have plenty of time to train you," he said.

Frostmask blinked, her brow furrowing slightly.

"Train me?" she echoed in confusion.

"Yes," Sedgestar meowed with a nod, his serious eyes staring into hers. "Being deputy involves more than just handing out patrol

assignments. If you want, you can think of me like your mentor, and this like a second apprenticeship. You may be inexperienced now, but I will teach you all I know. You will learn from me how to be a leader."

Frostmask had to tense her muscles to keep her fur from bristling, anger suddenly simmering deep down in her stomach.

So that's the real reason you chose me? Because I seemed like the easiest out of the younger warriors for you to control? To shape in your own image?

The sting of her anger started to take on a cold edge of resentment.

It wasn't fair! First Sedgestar made her deputy when she didn't want it, turning her into the target of all of the Clan's ire. Before this, she and Dampfang had learned to mostly tolerate each other, at least the majority of the time, but now whenever she saw him, he looked like he was a heartbeat away from tearing her tail off! Even Pineshade was mad at her because she had been too busy with being deputy to hunt with her. And, now Sedgestar said he wanted to make her into leader like him, as if it was something to be happy about? She didn't want to be like him!

But, she couldn't even tell him that she didn't want to be deputy. It should be an honor, and currently, his trust in her loyalty was already whisker-thin at best. After all, what sort of warrior wouldn't want this honor? He would *definitely* think she was disloyal if she told him the truth.

Frostmask blinked hard, struggling to keep her emotions in check and control her expression. She looked away from Sedgestar, turning her gaze on the ground instead to hide her thoughts. She took a few deep breaths in through her nose.

Calm down. she ordered herself. *I'm probably just getting this upset because I didn't get much sleep. Yeah, that must be it. That's just putting me in a bad mood.*

Those rational thoughts helped settle her some, but the resentment didn't entirely go away. Instead it just retreated to lurk in the back

of her mind, half-submerged, but decidedly still there.

Sedgestar must have noticed the turmoil in her expression, but he misread the cause.

"You've always underestimated yourself," he said. "You are much more capable than you realize."

"Thank you," Frostmask managed to murmur, keeping her gaze on the ground.

"Let's move on to the gathering," Sedgestar said, flicking his ears. "We can decide who's coming on the patrol first then get into the details."

Frostmask brought her eyes back up to his.

"Pineshade would like to go," she said quickly.

Sedgestar's brow furrowed.

"Her wounds are healed enough?" he asked.

Frostmask nodded.

"As much as possible," she said. "And, she hasn't been to a gathering in a while. Neither has Mosspounce for that matter, since they were both still healing last full moon."

"Alright," Sedgestar agreed. "Then I see no reason why they can't attend. Who else?"

Frostmask blinked thoughtfully.

"We should bring Lizardstrike, Featherfall, and Yewstorm. They'll be eager to attend their first gathering as warriors," she said "But, Poolcloud should stay. Dewleaf is getting extremely close to kitting, so I don't think he'd be comfortable not staying close to her. Especially if Elmclaw is at the gathering. I'm not sure about anyone else though. How do you pick normally? Just choose cats who haven't been to a gathering in a while?"

Sedgestar nodded.

"That's part of it. It's good to be fair so no one feels left out," he said. "Okay, so let's take Pineshade, Mosspounce, Lizardstrike, Featherfall, Yewstorm, Snakeeyes, Cricketpaw, Beeclaw, Dampfang and Dustleap."

"And, any elders who want to join can too, right?" Frostmask asked, trying to recall the lessons she'd learned about gatherings back in her apprenticeship.

"Any elders or queens," Sedgestar corrected. "But, I think you're right that Dewleaf is too close to kitting to attend, and I'd suspect that Amberberry will want to stay with her kits. Larkfoot may want to come though."

Sedgestar shifted his position slightly, settling into his mossy nest more.

"So the patrol is all decided," he said. "Now let's get into the interesting stuff."

Frostmask met his bright eyes.

"Politics?" she guessed.

"Yes," Sedgestar meowed, his tail flicking with energy. "I expect this gathering will be a tense one, all things considered. Although our borders have been quite peaceful this past moon."

Sedgestar rumbled a brief purr.

"I never thought I'd be grateful for bordering Rabbitstar, but here we are! Since things have been cordial with WindClan for a while, I don't expect any trouble from him tonight. Although Rabbitstar will likely brag and bluster as he likes to do."

"And, ThunderClan?" Frostmask asked. "How do you think they're faring?"

"It's possible that they've experienced some trouble from SkyClan or RiverClan in this past moon," Sedgestar said, his ears twisting back

slightly. "But, I'd expect we'd have heard something from their border patrols if anything big had happened."

"Do you think Fennelstar and Willowstar will be planning on retaliating against them soon? And, against us?" Frostmask asked, anxiety contorting in her gut. "That last battle can't be the end of it, right?"

"I doubt SkyClan will give up their claim on that strip of ThunderClan territory that easily," Sedgestar said, his tail swishing thoughtfully. "And, the last battle has been the first in seasons fought on RiverClan soil, and Willowstar is a proud cat. I doubt she will let that go easily as well. So, I'm certain that there is trouble brewing. But, will it be trouble for us? *ThunderClan* led the offense against RiverClan, and it's *ThunderClan* land that SkyClan is after."

"ThunderClan are closer physically to them too," Frostmask agreed, but then her brow furrowed as she was struck by a sudden thought.

She hesitated a heartbeat, concern trickling through her.

"Did..." she finally began again, her tail twitching with unease. "...Did you realize all that when planning the last battle? Did you ask Morningstar to have ThunderClan lead the attack on RiverClan, while ShadowClan led the attack against SkyClan, knowing that would mean ThunderClan would become the main target for both RiverClan and SkyClan?"

Sedgestar's amber eyes were unreadable as he blinked once slowly.

"If I had the choice between ShadowClan's wellbeing and ThunderClan's, which one do you think I would pick?" he said by way of answering.

Although Sedgestar's words were indirect, Frostmask understood their meaning. It seemed pretty clear that he had indeed thrown ThunderClan in front of ShadowClan like a living shield, and Morningstar was totally ignorant to it.

"But, RiverClan knows that we tried to go after their herbs," Frostmask said in weak protest, shifting uncomfortably under

Sedgestar's intense gaze. "Wouldn't that make us more of a target for them?"

"RiverClan knows that they chased a ShadowClan patrol off their territory; they don't know why we were there," Sedgestar corrected, but then he grimaced slightly. "But, things don't always go according to plan. RiverClan should have never known that a ShadowClan cat stepped foot on their territory at all."

Frostmask swallowed. So that confirmed it: Morningstar *was* being played by Sedgestar. It didn't matter that he was ShadowClan's closest ally, that wasn't enough to give him immunity. Then, did Sedgestar's manipulations really stop there with ThunderClan? Or did it extend further— from allies to friends, to ShadowClan itself? And, if he was able to so causally maneuver his allies into the line of fire, what would Sedgestar be capable of doing to a cat that he deemed his enemy? Frostmask had already gotten a taste of his fury when he believed that she was a traitor to ShadowClan, although at the time, she'd been totally innocent.

But, what would he do to me now? If he knew that I've been meeting with Paledusk?

Frostmask suppressed a shiver.

"Anyway, we will play it by ear, but I suspect that there won't be any declarations of war this moon. Instead, you will likely be the main attraction," Sedgestar continued.

Frostmask blinked, pulling herself out of her thoughts and refocusing on the conversation.

"Me?" she asked.

Sedgestar nodded.

"New deputies and leaders don't happen all the time, so Clans tend to make a bit of a fuss about it," he said with an amused twitch of his whiskers before growing serious again. "Prepare yourself: not everything they'll say about you will be nice."

Frostmask gave a quiet huff of bitter amusement at that.

Well good thing I'm used to it. I think I might be more uncomfortable if they were complimenting me all night!

Sedgestar rose to his paws, arching his back as he took a moment to stretch before he turned to the den's exit.

"Come," he said over his shoulder as he padded into the root tunnel and beckoned her forward with his tail. "It looks like the light is fading. Let's go call the patrol and head out."

Frostmask had to stifle a sigh, but she rose to her paws and dutifully followed her leader away.

Adaptability

The ShadowClan patrol crouched on the crest of the hill. Their reflective eyes glowed yellow in the moonlight, flashing like fireflies with each blink as they peered down the slope and into the gathering clearing. For the first time, Frostmask was at the head of the patrol at Sedgestar's side. But, the place of honor didn't come without cost. Her fur prickled as she felt the cold rage in Dampfang's gaze boring into the back of her skull.

Fourtrees below them was fairly empty. Judging by the scant amount of cats, it looked like only one other Clan had already arrived. Frostmask opened her jaws to drink in the breeze. The cool scent of windblown trees settled on her tongue, and her gaze flashed to the figures sitting at the base of the Great Rock, finding the one whose pelt glowed brighter in the moonlight than his shadowed companions.

SkyClan.

Sedgestar gave the signal to move, and ShadowClan streaked down the slope in unbroken formation until they reached the undergrowth that surrounded the Fourtrees' clearing. There they slowed and lingered for a few moments. No ShadowClan cat seemed particularly eager to join the SkyClan cats, and based on the hostile glares ricocheting in their direction, SkyClan wasn't all too happy to see them either. Frostmask's eyes flitted over the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of Larchtail's tabby pelt or Mottledflame's tortoiseshell one, but before she could, Sedgestar touched his tail-tip to her shoulder.

"Remember," he murmured. "The gathering is not just for socializing anymore. We have duties to attend to."

Frostmask nodded, pulling her gaze off the crowd and glancing at him.

"Follow. We should greet Fennelstar and Paledusk," Sedgestar said,

turning towards the Great Rock and where the SkyClan leader and deputy sat at its base.

Frostmask was forced to hurry to keep up with Sedgestar's longer stride, moving her shorter legs faster than his. Out of the corner of her gaze, she noticed a few intrigued glances shot in her direction from the SkyClan warriors as she walked with Sedgestar towards the Great Rock. Her ears burned. She imagined that to them, she must look very much like a kit trying to match pace with a warrior. Frostmask blinked hard, trying to shove her self-conscious thoughts out of her head as she put her muzzle close to Sedgestar's ear.

"Do I need to do anything?" she asked in a hissed whisper.

"Try to be amiable," Sedgestar said, speaking in such a quiet voice, Frostmask had to strain her ears to hear him. "Don't start fights, but don't back down from them either. If you don't feel like talking, that's alright. I will take care of most of it."

Sedgestar fell silent as they drew closer and caught Fennelstar's and Paledusk's attention. Frostmask glanced briefly towards Paledusk. For a moment, worry swirled in her belly as she feared that he would be upset at her for missing their last meeting. But, her attention was quickly pulled away from him and towards Fennelstar as the SkyClan leader straightened and turned towards them. Frostmask was suddenly struck by how frail he looked next to Paledusk. She could make out the shape of Fennelstar's bones beneath his long-furred pelt despite the fact that it was nearing green-leaf, and the other SkyClan warriors all seemed a healthy weight.

Her brow furrowed.

He must be sick again. Or, maybe his seasons are just catching up with him. He is the oldest of the leaders.

Fennelstar's eyes were rheumy and dull with exhaustion as they swept over her. But, they still seemed sharp with intelligence as they suddenly narrowed.

"Sedgestar. Where's Grovepelt?" he asked bluntly, his voice coming

out as a croak.

"Back at camp," Sedgestar said, inclining his head towards Fennelstar and Paledusk in a faint hint of greeting. "This is Frostmask. My new deputy."

Frostmask could feel Paledusk's intently curious gaze on her, but she willed herself not to look at him. She feared that if they made eye contact while standing so close to their leaders, Sedgestar or Fennelstar would notice some sort of connection between them.

"New deputy?" Fennelstar echoed, blinking in surprise.

He gave a harsh bark of laughter which turned into a hacking cough for a moment. But, he recovered quickly, clearing his throat, and his voice came out stronger.

"Don't tell me that old dog finally retired?" Fennelstar's gaze flared mockingly in the moonlight.

Frostmask knew Sedgestar well enough by now to see his anger in the slight tightening of his jaw, but he kept it hidden away from the SkyClan cats.

"Grovepelt more than deserves his moons of rest. Perhaps it's something that you should consider as well, Fennelstar. You're not looking too well," Sedgestar said, a quiet edge of false concern creeping into his voice.

Fennelstar quickly bristled.

"I caught a chill from staying out too long in the rain. That is all," he growled.

"If you say so," Sedgestar said breezily, flicking his ears.

Fennelstar growled again and then turned, and as if to prove himself whole and hearty, launched himself up the Great Rock, stalking to the far end of it. Not one to be left behind, Sedgestar twitched an ear at Frostmask in goodbye before following Fennelstar up the boulder, leaving Frostmask alone with Paledusk.

A beat of silence filled the air.

"Deputy, huh? Congratulations," Paledusk said.

His words were warm but quiet— loud enough to reach Frostmask's ears but no further.

Frostmask finally allowed herself to meet his eyes, and a flicker of warmth appeared in her chest in response. Paledusk seemed happy to see her, and more than a bit pleasantly surprised and impressed to see her as *deputy*. He also, thankfully, did not seem at all upset about her missing their last meeting.

"Thank you," she said, giving a small dip of her head.

Paledusk blinked once before subtly inclining his head slightly to the side in a motion for her to come next to him. She obeyed, walking over to side, but not too close, where she sat with the Great Rock to her back and turned to gaze out over the crowd.

It was an odd perspective. She was much more used to staring at it the other way.

"Don't look at me and try not to move your mouth when you speak," Paledusk said in that same soft voice, barely above a breath. "That way we can talk without anyone knowing."

"Is this how all the deputies do it?" Frostmask asked, trying her best to keep her lips still, and her voice came out in a mimic of his low, breathy tone.

As she spoke, her gaze roamed aimlessly over the crowd, looking at everything but seeing nothing.

A quiet purr rumbled from Paledusk.

"Indeed," he said. "It'd be quite boring for us if we truly just sat here looking stoic all night, hm?"

Frostmask murmured an agreement.

"How long have you been deputy?" Paledusk asked, curiosity lacing

his tone. "As I recall, neither you nor Grovepelt were at the gathering last moon."

"I've only been deputy for about a half-moon," Frostmask responded.

She was finding it harder than she anticipated to not look towards Paledusk as she spoke to him. Her eyes kept drifting in his direction before she realized what was happening and quickly pointed them somewhere else. Now, she locked her gaze on Lizardstrike's white pelt, firmly telling herself to keep her eyes on him.

ShadowClan was still avoiding SkyClan for the most part. Lizardstrike was sitting with his siblings and Cricketpaw, and staunchly ignoring any nearby SkyClan warriors.

"And, is Grovepelt truly just back at camp?" Paledusk asked.

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"He's not dead, if that's what you're implying," she said, her shoulder fur rising slightly at the thought. "One of his injuries from the battle just wasn't healing well. He'd been wanting to retire to the elders' den for a while, and this seemed to be the right time."

"I see," Paledusk murmured.

Lizardstrike's eyes flickered in Frostmask's direction, and seeing her staring at him, he raised his tail in hello, his eyes bright. Frostmask gave him a friendly blink in response before deciding that she should look somewhere else, so that Lizardstrike wouldn't think something was wrong if he caught her gazing intently at him again. Instead, she made Pineshade her next target, sending her gaze searching for her in the crowd.

"Have you been enjoying it so far?" Paledusk asked, a purr starting to vibrate beneath his words. "I remember, I was quite excited to do even the most mundane tasks for the first moon. Everyday felt like being an apprentice on my first day out of camp again."

"It's... alright," Frostmask said, drawing out her sentence before finally deciding on the term.

'Alright' was a good choice, she thought: Benign— not full of excitement, but not too negative either.

But, Paledusk must have still sensed some of her discontent.

"Have you been finding it too difficult?" he asked, concern in his tone.

Frostmask's eyes had found Pineshade, and she was now watching her, but in her mind, Frostmask saw Paledusk. She imagined that if she was looking at his face, he'd have a small, worried slant back to his ears.

"No, it's not the work," Frostmask reassured quickly, although, truthfully, she wouldn't tell him even if it was.

I'm deputy now, she reminded herself. *What I say reflects back on ShadowClan, as a whole, now more than ever before.*

"It's mostly just a few clan-mates who don't think I'm a good fit for the role," Frostmask added, figuring that that was a harmless thing to admit.

He'll obviously realize that at some point anyway. Paledusk is not stupid, and Dampfang is not subtle.

At that thought, her gaze flickered from Pineshade to Dampfang. They were sitting together at the edge of the gathering clearing and seemed to be speaking. It was hard to decipher anything from their expressions though; their dark pelts were almost completely swallowed up by the shadows cast by the foliage above them. But, Frostmask could still make out motion here and there— the flicking of annoyed tails and the flashing of eyes.

They must be quarreling again.

"The beginning of a new deputyship or leadership is a time of adjustment," Paledusk said, his voice taking on a soft note of wisdom, refocusing Frostmask's attention. "Not just for the individual with the new responsibilities, but for the Clan as a whole."

"Yes," Frostmask said with a soft sigh. "Although I'm not sure if all my clan-mates will ever agree with my appointment. I have this, um..."

Frostmask searched for the right word for Dampfang.

Bully? Thorn in my side? Piece of snake-dung?

"...Rival," Frostmask decided.

She mentally congratulated herself on coming up with the suitable term.

Maybe I will figure this politics thing out eventually.

"His name is Dampfang," she continued. "We've basically been rivals since kit-hood. I think he really wanted to be deputy instead of me. Or, wanted to see anyone *but* me deputy."

Paledusk paused for a moment in thoughtful silence.

"Let me guess... Dark fur, green eyes, glaring at you right now?" he said, wry humor in his voice.

Frostmask blinked, her attention sharpening back towards the crowd. Sure enough, Dampfang had left Pineshade sitting alone in undergrowth and wandered back into the heart of the clearing. Even from fox-lengths away, Frostmask could see his fur bristling with obvious anger as he stared at her. Frostmask narrowed her eyes at him in response.

"That's the one," she said, holding his gaze.

"You can win your Clan's respect," Paledusk said, and Frostmask blinked in surprise at the conviction in his voice. "Even if you never gain Dampfang's, he will have to fall in line with time."

"...How are you so sure of that?" she asked cautiously.

"You see, the course you two are on right now is unsustainable," Paledusk explained. "It will either end in a collision or with his surrender. And, if you assert your authority over the rest of

ShadowClan, he will have no choice but to yield, or risk isolating himself and becoming an outcast of the Clan."

Frostmask took more than a small amount of bitter joy at the thought of Dampfang becoming ShadowClan's outcast— the place that she'd held for so long.

Oh, how the winds have changed...

But, Paledusk hadn't quite answered the question that she'd wanted.

"What I meant was how do you know that I'll be able to gain the rest of my clan-mates' respect?" she clarified.

Paledusk let out a quiet huff of amusement.

"Well, you're May's and my daughter, aren't you?" he asked drily.

Frostmask blinked, a bit of warmth stirring in her chest.

She may not know all that much about either of her parents, especially in comparison to other cats who grew up with theirs, but one thing she did know for sure was that May and Paledusk were both very tough cats. May had to be to survive so long on her own, and Paledusk... well that was just obvious.

Maybe Paledusk was right about her gaining ShadowClan's respect. Sure, Frostmask didn't want to be deputy, but it was the job she had, so she should do her best to do it well.

Paledusk and Frostmask both fell silent at the sound of paw-steps thundering down the slope. The bushes surrounding the clearing rustled, and ThunderClan strode out, Morningstar at the patrol's head. As the rest of his warriors scattered to join ShadowClan to talk, Morningstar and Acornear headed straight for the Great Rock. Morningstar cast Frostmask a curious glance as he saw her sitting there, but he didn't stop to say anything. It seemed like he wanted to get the story straight from Sedgestar, since he quickly sprung up onto the boulder, meowing a greeting to the ShadowClan leader before the two of them began a low-toned discussion.

However, Acornear padded right up to Frostmask. As he

approached, though, he icily ignored Paledusk, not even casting him a single glance. It was as if in Acornear's eyes, the SkyClan deputy wasn't even there.

"Frostmask, hello!" Acornear greeted her, his yellow eyes curious. "Are you ShadowClan's new deputy?"

She nodded.

"I am," she said, lifting her chin in her best approximation of confidence.

"That's wonderful. Congratulations!" Acornear purred for a moment before turning solemn.

"But, is everything alright with Grovepelt?" he asked.

"He's just chosen to retire to the elders' den," Frostmask explained. "You'll hear the whole story from Sedgestar later."

"I'm sure I will," Acornear said with a nod before cocking his head to the side and studying Frostmask closely.

She got the sense that this was the first time that the ThunderClan deputy had ever put in the effort to *really* look at her.

Before she'd been no one to him— probably at best, the odd looking kit ShadowClan had adopted. But, now she was an equal— maybe one day a bitter rival, or a most trusted ally. As ShadowClan's deputy, she deserved a bit more than a fleeting glance.

"You were Swoopstrike's apprentice, weren't you?" Acornear asked suddenly.

Frostmask's eyes widened in surprise, and that little tender spot in her heart ached, as it so often did when someone brought Swoopstrike up unexpectedly.

"Yes, I was," she said.

"To be honest, I thought one day, I'd be sitting at the base of this rock with him," Acornear admitted. "But, I'm sure he'd be quite

proud to see his apprentice here instead."

Frostmask blinked. Truthfully, she hadn't yet put much thought into what Swoopstrike would think about this whole situation. But, Acornear's words warmed her from tail-tip to nose with pleasure, and she sat up a bit straighter, a purr rumbling loudly in her throat.

The undergrowth rustled again, this time heralding WindClan's appearance. As they joined the crowd, Rabbitstar and Wheatfur headed right towards the Great Rock as the other leaders and deputies had. Acornear nodded to Frostmask to end their conversation and moved to take his seat by the Great Rock, positioning Frostmask in between him and Paledusk.

Both Rabbitstar and Wheatfur cast dubious glances from narrowed eyes at Frostmask as they reached the Great Rock, but neither bothered talking to her. Rabbitstar joined the other leaders above, while Wheatfur took a seat on Paledusk's other side after they exchanged muttered greetings.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she tried to recall what she knew about the WindClan deputy. Besides the fact that she had kits a couple moons ago (which even if she didn't already know, she'd easily be able to tell from her milky scent) not that much.

Only a few heartbeats after WindClan's arrival did RiverClan appear. As they stalked into the clearing, their glossy pelts shone in the moonlight. They must have chosen to swim across the river to get here, rather than taking stepping-stones or a bridge, because they were soaked through from head to tail. Water droplets still collected on their whiskers like dew on grass blades, and they sparkled in the low light. The RiverClan warriors padded into the thick crowd, dispersing to chat. As they twined around warriors from other clans, Frostmask watched as they occasionally brushed their dripping pelts against them, and received outraged hisses in response for getting the other cats' fur wet. Frostmask couldn't entirely tell, but she was pretty sure that the RiverClanners were doing it on purpose.

Unlike Morningstar and Rabbitstar, when Willowstar caught sight of Frostmask, she immediately altered course. With Perchpelt trailing

behind her, Willowstar strode right up to Frostmask and stopped so uncomfortably close to her, Frostmask's dry whiskers almost brushed with her dripping ones.

"You're that former rogue ShadowClan brought in. Remind me your name," Willowstar commanded.

Every part of Willowstar—from her long, feathery tail, to the gently swirling stripes on her sides, to her silky pelt, and melodic voice—seemed soft and welcoming. Except for her eyes. Willowstar's eyes were as hard and sharp as ice, and Frostmask had to suppress a shiver as she stared into them.

"I'm Frostmask," she said, resisting the urge to lean back and put more distance between Willowstar and herself.

"That's right," Willowstar mused. "You're a young warrior, aren't you? Your name was announced, what? Six, seven moons ago?"

She shot a sharp glance over her shoulder.

"Perchpelt?"

"That sounds about right, ma'am," Perchpelt responded, flicking water droplets off his ears. "She became a warrior alongside a litter of three."

Frostmask must have looked shocked that the RiverClan warriors remembered so much about her life, because Willowstar released a high-pitched purr of amusement.

"Oh look, the poor dear is so confused," Willowstar said, her voice pitying but her eyes glinting wickedly. "ShadowClan doesn't keep such close records of their enemies as RiverClan does, hm dear? Why am I not surprised."

"Willowstar."

Frostmask felt a jolt of relief as Sedgestar's sharp voice suddenly appeared. She shot a quick glance upwards to see him glowering down at the RiverClan leader from over the edge of the Great Rock.

"Are you going to stand down there, harassing my deputy all night, or should we start this gathering?" he growled.

Willowstar flicked her tail, but she didn't seem all that bothered by Sedgestar's rebuke as she sprung up onto the Great Rock. As soon as her paws touched the boulder, Sedgestar threw his head back, releasing a yowl for silence. Perchpelt took his seat next to Wheatfur, and the large, murmuring crowd settled.

Frostmask dug her toes into the ground to steady herself as suddenly dozens of eyes seemed to turn right towards her. Her nervous heartbeat thrummed in her ears, and her gaze, a bit desperately, scanned the dense crowd, searching for a familiar pelt to latch onto. It was Snakeeyes that she found first, and she relaxed slightly as the queen gave her an encouraging nod as their gazes met.

"Let the gathering begin!" Sedgestar's voice rang out. "I will open the meeting. ShadowClan has much to share tonight."

"It looks like it," Rabbitstar growled, shooting a pointed glance down at Frostmask.

Sedgestar ignored him.

"We've had a prosperous past moon. With every passing sunrise, more prey returns to our territory, and our clan grows. Dewleaf is expecting kits, who will be born any day now," Sedgestar said, lifting his chin. "We've also made three new warriors: Lizardstrike, Yewstorm, and Featherfall!"

Frostmask sat up a bit straighter, purring with pride as ShadowClan cheered for their new warriors with some cats from the other clans joining in, mostly from ThunderClan. From her side, Acornear gave her a friendly nod.

"One of them yours?" he guessed, his voice a soft murmur. "Congratulations."

She blinked in confirmation.

"Thank you," Frostmask whispered back.

"Although, I also have some bittersweet news to share," Sedgestar said, once the cheering died down, his tone becoming a touch more solemn. "Grovepelt, who has served as my loyal deputy for many seasons, since the start of my leadership, has chosen to retire to the elders' den. There he will receive the honor and care befitting his many seasons of faithful service, and I hope he continues to share his wisdom with ShadowClan for many moons to come."

"Grovepelt!"

A cheer for him rose up from a group of ShadowClan cats in the crowd, but then it began to spread, rippling through the clearing.

"Grovepelt! Grovepelt!"

Even though he wasn't in attendance, the former deputy got even more cheers than Lizardstrike, Featherfall, and Yewstorm did. But, Frostmask figured he was more well-known among the clans, and if she had to guess, fairly well-liked, given his kindly reputation.

Also, a cynical part of her mind whispered, *since he's retired, he's no longer a direct threat to the other clans. Now, they can cheer to honor him without fear, since they know they won't meet him in a future battle.*

"Frostmask has been named my new deputy," Sedgestar said, with a nod down towards her before taking a seat to signal the end of his announcements.

Frostmask locked her eyes straight ahead, looking out into the trees rather than the crowd, willing herself to be calm and still as the eyes of everyone at the gathering turned towards her.

As they stared at her in silence for a moment, she thought that their reaction seemed quite mild, especially given Sedgestar's earlier warning. But, his premonition quickly came to pass as sudden muttering filled the air, and Sedgestar was suddenly bombarded by questions from the crowd.

"Who is that?"

"Isn't she the rogue?"

"Why did Grovepelt retire?"

It was Morningstar who yowled for silence this time.

"Why are you all meowing? The gathering isn't over," the ThunderClan leader scolded, frowning out into crowd.

"Well, *I* think the warriors deserve to have their questions answered," Rabbitstar cut in, his thin, ginger tail flicking. "So, tell us Sedgestar, why did Grovepelt retire?"

"He was injured in a battle, and the severity of his wounds and his age have been making recovery difficult," Sedgestar said, his face and voice impassive as if he was reporting on some banal weather.

"A shame," Fennelstar said in a tone which made it sound like the opposite. "But, maybe there is a lesson to be learned here. If ShadowClan kept their noses out of the other Clans' business, then Grovepelt would've never gotten injured."

"SkyClan's affairs became our business when your warriors raided our camp and stole our herbs in the heart of leaf-bare," Sedgestar said with a low growl, his neutral expression darkening some.

Rabbitstar's large ears pricked in interest.

"There was herb theft? I never heard about this," he said.

"That was in retaliation. ShadowClan attacked our camp first!" Fennelstar growled, ignoring Rabbitstar.

Morningstar's head jerked towards Fennelstar.

"Only because you fox-hearts won't stop trying to steal our land!" he spat, his tail lashing. "ShadowClan has been our noble ally against SkyClan's and RiverClan's dishonest attacks!"

"Don't drag us into this," Willowstar said, baring her fangs. "You have a lot of nerve, Morningstar, talking about treacherous attacks when less than two moons ago, ThunderClan raided our land when my clan was peacefully celebrating the equinox on the banks of our river!"

"You first helped SkyClan steal our territory!" Morningstar hissed.

Willowstar flicked her tail irritably.

"I gave warriors to bolster SkyClan's numbers, yes, in exchange for territory rights on both banks of the river from SkyClan," she growled. "But, I didn't attack your clan during a sacred celebration!"

"How was I supposed to know that you had some sort of celebration that day?!" Morningstar growled, rolling his eyes.

Hisses of offense rippled through the RiverClan and WindClan warriors.

"The equinoxes and solstices are the days when the spirits see most clearly into the lands of the living! Those days are sacred for all cats," Willowstar snarled, her back arching slightly.

"If ThunderClan wasn't such a den of heathens, they'd know that," Rabbitstar growled in agreement.

Frostmask's ears flicked nervously as the tension in the gathering heightened.

Truthfully, she'd never heard much about the equinoxes and solstices before this either. Celebrating them certainly wasn't something widely talked about or engaged with in ShadowClan. But, they were apparently quite important in RiverClan and WindClan, judging by the outrage their warriors were showing to Morningstar's comment.

Sedgestar took a step between Morningstar and the bristling RiverClan and WindClan leaders.

"Calm down," he rumbled, turning to stare at Willowstar and Rabbitstar. "I'm sure Morningstar meant no offense."

Rabbitstar huffed.

"You speak boldly for someone who has even less regard for the old traditions than ThunderClan does," Rabbitstar hissed, his eyes narrowing. "Just look at your deputy pick! You've put a rogue as

next in line for Clan leader! What were you thinking?!"

Frostmask swallowed, her mouth dry. This turn in conversation was hardly surprising, but she still shifted uneasily under the unfriendly glares shot in her direction.

"I have to agree with Rabbitstar on this," Willowstar broke in.

Sedgestar tore his gaze off Rabbitstar to send a searing look at her.

"So those rumors I hear about RiverClan welcoming half-clan kits in with open arms aren't true?" he asked icily.

Frostmask's ears pricked. This information was new to her, and evidently also to many other cats in the gathering, since gasps of surprise echoed around the clearing. But, despite this sudden reveal, Willowstar lifted her chin, unabashed.

"No. They are true," she said, her voice ringing out confidently. "But, that's different. Even one drop of RiverClan blood in a cat means that they belong to RiverClan. They have ancestors in our skies, watching them as much as us. But, what spirits watch rogues? Would StarClan even grant Frostmask her nine lives, if one day she became leader? What spirits would be there to greet her?"

"I would," Sedgestar hissed, his amber eyes narrowing.

"Although I don't entirely agree with Willowstar's philosophy on half-Clan cats," Rabbitstar said, shooting the RiverClan leader a look out of the corner of his eye. "She's right about Frostmask."

"No," Sedgestar growled stubbornly, his tail starting to flick behind him. "She was my choice, named in a ceremony under the light of Silverpelt. StarClan saw and approved her. Our ancestors help guide us, but they don't control our lives. They would not reject my choice."

"What makes ShadowClan think that you're above our ancestors' law?" Rabbitstar suddenly exploded with a furious snarl, scraping unsheathed claws on the stone below him as he whirled on Sedgestar. "You lot are no better than a band of rogues!"

Snarls from ShadowClan warriors echoed through the clearing. Frostmask's pelt rose with alarm as she glanced into the crowd and saw her clan-mates sizing up the WindClanners. Dustleap and a WindClan warrior near him seemed like they were only heartbeats away from exchanging blows.

Oh, please don't break the truce! Frostmask mentally pleaded with her clan-mates. *You'll just make ShadowClan look worse!*

"Now, now Rabbitstar, let's be reasonable," Fennelstar chided, abruptly interrupting the skyrocketing tension.

Despite his unwell state, when Fennelstar drew himself up to his full height and wrapped his bushy tail around his paws, he looked every part a regal leader, and the gathering once again fell quiet to hear what he had to say. Fennelstar swept his gaze over the clearing, taking in the pelt of every ShadowClan warrior present.

"We all know that ShadowClan has always been the place of rejects and broken things," Fennelstar said in a steady, unnervingly calm voice. "They live in the swamplands because no other Clan wanted it, and they eat the prey that squirms in the mud because no other cat could stomach it. When the wind blows south, in SkyClan, we can smell the rats, the rot, and the foul two-leg trash in the air, carried for leagues to our territory from their Carrionplace. Why does it surprise anyone that they've made a rogue their deputy? Vermin and detritus are the only things that ShadowClan knows."

Frostmask's stomach twisted in anger, and before Fennelstar had even finished speaking, a chorus of offended yowls rose up from the ShadowClan cats in the crowd. They crashed like waves against the responding jeers and scoffs from the SkyClan and WindClan cats.

Frostmask had thought it had been bad before, but now the tension in the air was as heavy as a hurricane. As she glanced up, she almost expected to see the dark clouds swirling violently above, a torrential downpour about to break. But, the sky remained clear; evidently things had not gotten so out of control that StarClan felt the need to intervene.

Beside Frostmask, Paledusk shifted, the motion drawing her

attention. His expression was stern but not hostile, and their eyes met for the briefest moment. His gaze flicked away just as quickly, but not before Frostmask saw the sympathy glittering there.

Frostmask stiffened her spine and stared impassively out over the angrily pulsing crowd for a moment, willing her expression to be as hard, cold, and indifferent as the one Sedgestar often wore.

She cast a quick glance at her leader to see how he was responding. Although everyone else in ShadowClan seemed to have no issue in displaying their rage, Sedgestar kept his face under tight control, allowing his fury to only seep through in the curl of his lip.

"I will never apologize for ShadowClan's adaptability," Sedgestar growled, his words dripping with venom. "It is part of what makes us strong— to see the beauty in what you find ugly, to feast on the food that you lot turn your muzzles up at. Because change is inevitable— a cat must adapt, or die. A time will come for you, Fennelstar, Rabbitstar, maybe not in your lifetimes, but in the lives of your descendants, when your Clans will face great change. Will SkyClan and WindClan adapt? Or, are you so small-minded that you will allow yourselves to be destroyed, like an insect smacking itself against the side of a stone, again and again, because it does not think to fly around it? Unlike you, I do not have to worry about my Clan's future. I know that no matter what, ShadowClan will survive."

Rabbitstar released a wordless hiss as Fennelstar's eyes narrowed.

"You spit on the ways of our ancestors, Sedgestar," Fennelstar growled. "And, ShadowClan shall suffer for your hubris."

That decidedly sounded like a threat to Frostmask's ears, but Sedgestar lifted his muzzle to the air defiantly.

"I have nothing more to say to any of you. ShadowClan, we're done here," Sedgestar said, turning to descend from the Great Rock.

Frostmask rose to her paws, preparing to join him.

"The waxing half-moon," Paledusk's faint voice suddenly hissed in

Frostmask's ear.

She blinked in surprise, stopping herself just in time from turning her head in his direction and looking at him.

"Meet me here."

Frostmask stomach lurched. She twitched one of her ears, but beyond that, couldn't acknowledge that she'd heard him because Sedgestar had just sprung down to her side. She stuck close to her leader as ShadowClan peeled away from the rest of the clans and coalesced at the edge of the clearing.

Thankfully, Sedgestar had summoned ShadowClan quickly enough that no fights had had the chance to break out. The other clans were now silent, no longer jeering at ShadowClan, but Frostmask's pelt prickled at the feeling of their dozens and dozens of hostile eyes watching them scramble up the side of the hollow as they exited the gathering. Sedgestar led the patrol in fuming silence, and Frostmask didn't relax until they disappeared into the undergrowth and out of the other Clans' sight.

New Life

Frostmask's stomach churned uneasily, her thoughts remaining on the gathering while Sedgestar navigated their patrol to the tunnel that ran beneath the thunderpath and back into ShadowClan territory. He slipped into the black hole hidden beneath the thicket, and she was the first cat to follow him inside.

"Superstitious fools," Sedgestar finally hissed as they stalked through the dank tunnel, their paws splashing in stagnant puddles.

Frostmask murmured a half-hearted agreement. Sedgestar glanced back at her out of the corner of his eyes, his shadowed amber gaze barely visible in the low light.

"I'm sorry you had to sit through that," he muttered in a low voice. "Their reaction was even more vitriolic than I expected."

Frostmask's tail twitched, but she wasn't really irritated at Sedgestar. It seemed like he'd at least tried to defend her as best he could at the gathering.

Was he really defending you though? An insidious thought whispered. *Or, just his own pride?*

She sent that thought away with a swift, nearly imperceptible shake of her head.

Regardless, he's apologizing to me now, at least.

"It's fine," she said, doing her best to keep her voice level. "ShadowClan never cares what the other clans think of us, right?"

Sedgestar shot her an approving glance.

"That's right," he said, his flicking tail stilling slightly.

Frostmask's brow furrowed with worry as they emerged out of the tunnel and back into ShadowClan's territory.

"I just hope that I haven't made things worse by being deputy," she said to Sedgestar as they waited for the rest of their clan-mates to emerge from the tunnel behind them. "Like, will Rabbitstar start to be more aggressive now?"

Sedgestar scoffed.

"That talk was likely all for show. Even if Fennelstar truly, deeply believes in a righteous crusade against rogues, that isn't why he's threatening us. He's just got a grudge and is trying to give himself more legitimacy in the eyes of his clan and his allies," he explained. "As for WindClan, maybe they will hurl a few more insults at us over the borders, but Rabbitstar isn't stupid. I doubt he will actually want to get himself tangled up in this mess between us, SkyClan, ThunderClan, and RiverClan."

Frostmask nodded, relaxing slightly.

"Do you think that there's any truth to what Rabbitstar and Willowstar were saying?" Dampfang's voice suddenly spoke up. "About StarClan not accepting a rogue-blooded leader?"

Frostmask shot a sharp glance at him, but really, she didn't have any grounds to reprimand him. On the surface at least, his tone was one of genuine worry and concern, even if their gazes met for a heartbeat as he sent her a sly look from out of the corner of his eye.

"No," Sedgestar said, stone-faced. "I think if StarClan had any issue with me making Frostmask deputy, they'd have sent me a sign about it."

Sedgestar started to turn, and Frostmask went to follow, but not before she heard Dampfang whisper faintly in response:

"What if they *already* have?"

Frostmask's shoulder fur bristled, and she glanced back at Dampfang.

"...Meaning?" she asked sharply.

Dampfang sighed, rolling his eyes slightly.

"I can't seriously be the only one that remembers the rotten pine omen, right?" he said, glancing around at the other cats in the patrol.

"That message is seasons old at this point," Frostmask pointed out. "It was given moons before I was even made a warrior."

"Do prophecies spoil like fresh-kill left too long in the sun?!" Dampfang demanded, his tail twitching. "The point of them is to warn us about something in *the future,* and it seems that its warning hasn't yet come to pass. So, it's still relevant, right?"

Frostmask shrugged, unsure of the mystical workings of the warrior ancestors, and her other clan-mates shifted uncertainly as well. Dampfang's eyes sought out Elmclaw in the crowd.

"Our medicine cat is right here. He can tell us," Dampfang said, locking his eyes on Elmclaw's.

Elmclaw sighed, looking like he'd rather be doing anything else at the moment than being interrogated by his younger brother.

"Technically, Dampfang is right," Elmclaw said.

Dampfang raised his chin in triumph.

"But," Elmclaw emphasized. "I don't think we should put so much weight into omens, especially not one as vague as the rotten pine. Yes, it is a warning, of course, but of what, it's almost impossible to say. Prophecies can have multiple meanings, or come to pass in the way you'd least expect."

Elmclaw's gaze flickered to Frostmask.

"Although, I'm not saying that it's about you," he said. "In fact, I seriously doubt it is."

"There," Sedgestar's voice suddenly broke in. "That settles it then. It's not about Frostmask, so it's not relevant here."

Sedgestar signaled the group forward, and they resumed their trek back to camp. Frostmask could still hear Dampfang grumbling softly

from the back of the patrol, but his voice wasn't clear enough for her to make out his words, and he didn't protest out loud to the group again.

Frostmask's fur still stood on end from the interaction, but she shook it off, ignoring Dampfang's muttering and lengthening her stride, trotting for a moment to catch up with Sedgestar.

Dampfang should just put a mouse in it. Elmclaw must be right; he's the medicine cat after all. There's no way that the rotten pine omen could be about me.

"Shh!" Pineshade suddenly hushed from behind her, abruptly silencing Dampfang and making Frostmask's ears prick in interest.

"What?" Dampfang huffed offendedly, although he also tried to keep his voice quiet.

"Just shut up about Frostmask," Pineshade growled. "The other clans aren't right about her."

A growl rumbled from Dampfang in response.

"You can't tell me what I can't talk about!" he snarled in low tones.

Their voices faded in Frostmask's ears. She shot a glance back over her shoulder to see them departing from the patrol and disappearing into the forest, their pelts bristling as they took their argument out of earshot of their clan-mates.

Frostmask shook her head and sighed softly to herself. On one paw, she felt like she should be pleased to see Dampfang's relationship with Pineshade crumbling, but on the other paw, she just felt bad for Pineshade.

Having to deal with Dampfang all of the time just seems so stressful.

The rest of the journey to the camp passed in relative uneventfulness.

The sting of the gathering and Dampfang's protests were soothed some as Frostmask received supportive comments from cats like

Snakeeyes, Lizardstrike, and Mosspounce, who swore that they would stand by her no matter what. But, others in the patrol like Dustleap and Greytail gazed at her uneasily, and she couldn't help but imagine that they were wishing that Sedgestar had picked someone else as deputy, someone who wouldn't be such an easy target for the other clans. She just hoped that they didn't also believe Dampfang's theory about the omen.

Dampfang and Pineshade still hadn't caught up to the group by the time that the thorn barrier came into view, but they quickly faded to the back of Frostmask's mind as she entered into the clearing and was greeted by a frazzled Autumnleap, whose tail twitched with something between excitement and nervousness. Despite it being very late into the night, nearing predawn, there were several other cats still awake, lying out in camp. Darkpelt was there, his chin resting on his paws, but his gaze trained intently on the nursery. Redclaw was leaning against Weaseltail's shoulder near the warriors' den, swallowing back yawns. Leafbreeze's eyes blinked in the deep shadows under the thorn barrier.

"What's going on?" Frostmask asked, turning to Autumnleap.

"Dewleaf went into labor shortly after you all left," Autumnleap explained. "Poolcloud is with her in the nursery now."

Concern flashed in Frostmask's chest. She opened her jaws to ask how Dewleaf was doing, but before the words could even pass her lips, she was interrupted by Elmclaw shouldering his way to the front of the gathering patrol.

"Is she alright?" Elmclaw demanded, his green eyes glittering with worry and a hint of accusation. "Why didn't anyone send a runner to get me?"

"Clearstream and Larkfoot are with her," Autumnleap said, glancing at Elmclaw. "They seemed to have everything under control."

"I'll go check on them," Elmclaw grumbled, swiftly brushing past Autumnleap and striding to the nursery.

Frostmask cast a glance after him.

Elmclaw must know that Clearstream was more than capable of delivering a litter of kits, even if she'd been retired from duties for a couple moons now. But, perhaps Elmclaw's irritation didn't stem from that, but rather a fear that their clan-mates lacked faith in his abilities, since they chose to rely on their retired medicine cat rather than also summoning him back to camp.

Or, maybe he'd just worried about his sister.

Frostmask's tail flicked.

In fact...

She looked over her shoulder to check the thorn tunnel again, but it remained empty.

Someone should really tell Dampfang that his sister is kitting.

If Pineshade was here, Frostmask would have asked her to go find him. But, since Dampfang was out with her, Frostmask wasn't sure who to turn to next. Perhaps Marshnose or Dustleap would go after him, but Frostmask's pelt prickled awkwardly at the thought of asking them for the favor, especially when she wasn't in either of their good graces to say the least. But, maybe she could just hope that one of Dampfang's friends would think of the idea of finding him themselves? They couldn't be that clueless, right?

Before Frostmask could solve her dilemma, Elmclaw had already crawled back out of the narrow nursery entrance, closely followed by Clearstream. The former medicine cat straightened as she noticed the many gazes trained on her.

"Dewleaf and the kits are resting now," she purred. "All are safe and healthy."

Mews of delight swept through the clan. Sedgestar stepped forward.

"That's wonderful news," he meowed. "We are lucky that you chose to remain in camp tonight."

Elmclaw shifted uncomfortably from behind Clearstream. But, Clearstream dismissed Sedgestar's praise with a flick of his ears.

"It was an easy birth, thank StarClan," she said. "I hardly had to do anything but meow encouragement."

She arched her back in a stretch.

"Now," Clearstream said, her gaze flitting around the camp. "I'm going to my nest. You all are aware that I retired so that I wouldn't have to get up in the middle of the night for these sorts of things, right?! Next time, you better go get Elmclaw instead. Or else, I'll send you to him myself when I claw your ears after you wake me up."

Amused purrs rumbled all across camp. But, Clearstream's gentle support of Elmclaw's authority didn't go unnoticed by Frostmask, or by Elmclaw himself. There was gratitude in his eyes as he blinked at Clearstream, and she bunted her head against his shoulder affectionately as she padded past him and to the elders' den.

After Clearstream's announcement, everyone split up to head back to their nests to sleep, a pawful of cats sticking their heads into the nursery to meow congratulations to the new family on their way. Frostmask lingered in camp, feeling like *someone* should still be here to tell Dampfang and Pineshade about Dewleaf's and Poolcloud's kits, whenever it was that they got back.

Autumnleap stayed out as well, still at her side as he turned to her, his eyes bright with interest.

"So, tell me! How was your first gathering as deputy?! What was it..." Autumnleap's voice trailed off suddenly, and his brow furrowed as he was struck with a thought. "Hey, wait, aren't you all back early? Usually the sky's already lightening by the time the gathering patrol arrives back at camp. Short gathering?"

Frostmask gave a brief, sharp sigh, sitting down.

"Nope. We left early," she said.

Autumnleap's ears pricked.

"What happened?" he asked, searching her face intently with his gaze.

Frostmask's tail thumped against the ground.

"Well, I'm sure Sedgestar will make an announcement in the morning about it," she sighed. "But, apparently, I'm cursed."

Autumnleap's face screwed up as he blinked hard in confusion.

"What?" he asked.

Frostmask released a soft huff of amusement at his wrinkled up expression, before she tilted her head back to study the star-studded sky and the large, unblinking eye of the moon.

"Well I'm simplifying, but that's the gist of it," she said. "They tossed around a lot of insults to ShadowClan, and Willowstar, Fennelstar, and Rabbitstar pretty much said that there's no way that StarClan could approve of a former rogue being deputy or leader. They said that since I don't have ancestors in StarClan, there wouldn't be any spirits to greet me to approve my leadership or give me nine lives."

Not that any of them are aware, but that's not even true. Frostmask thought. *I do have kin in StarClan— all of Paledusk's ancestors. Even his brother Slatewhisker is there...*

Frostmask frowned slightly.

Maybe, she amended. *If his spirit found its way there without a death ceremony. Or, if he's not actually alive somewhere out there.*

"That's a load of snake-dung," Autumnleap spat vehemently, refocusing Frostmask's attention. "None of our clan-mates believe them, right? Because I know for sure, if you became leader, there's absolutely no way that Swoopstrike wouldn't be clawing at the other spirts to be the first in line to see you."

A purr blossomed in Frostmask's chest as she lowered her gaze from the sky to glance over at Autumnleap. She leaned against his side gratefully.

"A few cats seem angry about the fact that me being deputy caused the other leaders to say such horrible things about ShadowClan," Frostmask explained. "But, I don't think anyone truly *believes* them."

A feeling of discomfort crawled into her stomach as she remembered the argument in the woods, with Dampfang bringing up the rotten pine omen as proof that Frostmask didn't have StarClan's approval to be deputy. But, she gave her head a small shake, pushing that thought aside. Everyone knew that Dampfang hated the fact that she was deputy, and so he'd say just about anything to try to make her lose the position. That must be the reason that he brought that up, right? He couldn't *genuinely* believe that it was true.

He must have just been trying to mess with me, like he always does.

Autumnleap rasped his tongue over her forehead affectionately.

"Good," he murmured. "Because for a moment there, I thought I'd have to claw some sense into our clan-mates."

Frostmask started to purr louder.

"I have to warn you, you really shouldn't be threatening to hurt your clan-mates in front of your deputy," Frostmask teased. "I might have to report this to Sedgestar."

Autumnleap's eyes widened in mock worry.

"Have some mercy on me! I didn't name names!" he protested.

Soft rustling suddenly filled the air behind them, and Frostmask glanced over her shoulder to see Poolcloud slipping out of the nursery, his amber eyes glowing with more happiness than she'd ever seen in his expression before. Frostmask and Autumnleap both purred loudly as he trotted over to them.

"What are you doing out here?!" Frostmask teased gently, her gaze warm with affection. "Go be with your mate and kits!"

"I thought I heard your voices," Poolcloud explained. "And, honestly, Dewleaf is probably sick of me hovering at this point."

"I'm so happy that her kitting went well," Frostmask purred. "You must be so proud."

A deep purr rumbled through Poolcloud, and he nodded.

"Well, tell us! How many are there? What do they look like?" Autumnleap demanded, purring as he nudged Poolcloud's side with his muzzle, half out of impatience and half out of affection.

"Have you picked out names?" Frostmask added.

Poolcloud's eyes shone.

"Would you like to come see them for yourselves?" he asked.

Frostmask's ears pricked, excitement prickling in her paws.

"Is Dewleaf awake?" she asked.

"Yeah, we were just talking," Poolcloud said, inclining his head towards the nursery. "She won't mind. It'll only be a moment anyway, just so you guys can see them and say hi to her."

"In that case, definitely!" Autumnleap said, jumping to his paws as Frostmask enthusiastically nodded along.

Poolcloud's tail curled up.

"Great!" he said, glancing around camp. "Have you seen Pineshade? She can come too. Is she already in the warriors' den?"

Frostmask's ears angled back, some excitement fading.

"Actually, she's still out of camp with Dampfang. They went to, *er*... talk... after the gathering," Frostmask said.

Poolcloud winced slightly, understanding her meaning. Dampfang's and Pineshade's growing arguments weren't exactly a secret. In fact, it was kind of hard to miss for anyone living in ShadowClan, since they'd started a moon and a half ago, after the battle and then only picked up heat with Frostmask's appointment to deputy.

"Well, I'll find her and him later," Poolcloud said. "You two can come now, before Dewleaf wants to go to sleep."

They nodded and followed Poolcloud into the nursery. As Frostmask slipped inside the cozy den, she blinked several times to adjust to the low light.

Dewleaf's nest was sequestered away from Amberberry's and Larkfoot's near the edge of the bush for the time being, likely so that Amberberry's older kits wouldn't bother the newborns. But, once the younger kits were a bit hardier, Dewleaf and her kits would move to join the other queens in the spacious nest in the center of the den.

After the excitement of the kitting, Amberberry and her kits were fast asleep in a golden and ginger-furred pile, although Larkfoot was not, and she blinked a greeting to Autumnleap and Frostmask as they entered. Dewleaf was still awake too as Poolcloud had told them, and she purred as she spotted them. Frostmask quietly tip-toed over to the edge of her nest, not wanting to wake anyone.

"Do you want to see them?" Dewleaf murmured.

Frostmask nodded.

"If you don't mind," she whispered.

"Of course not," the new queen purred.

Dewleaf moved her plumy tail to the side, uncovering the group of motley colored kits nestled into the curve of her belly, fast asleep.

Frostmask murmured a noise of gentle delight at the sight of the tiny newborns.

They each had small, folded ears, rosy noses and tightly closed eyes. It would be a quarter moon at least before their eyes and ears opened, and even longer before they would be able to see or hear clearly, and started to walk and speak.

"Two she-cats and two toms," Dewleaf murmured, gazing down at her kits with loving eyes.

"Four!" Autumnleap gasped softly, peering over at the tiny, fuzzy bundles. "Oh, that's a lot! You both will have your paws full with

them!"

Frostmask purred in agreement, her gaze flicking away from the kits and up to Dewleaf.

"They're beautiful. Have you named them yet?" she asked.

"We have," Dewleaf purred, lowering her muzzle towards the blue-grey she-cat first.

Her pelt resembled Dewleaf's the most out of the litter. She had her mother's solid grey fur, just with a slightly bluer tint.

"This little one is Lichenkit," Dewleaf said, rasping her tongue down her back.

"I like that name," Frostmask murmured.

Dewleaf blinked her thanks to Frostmask before she turned her head to a brown and white kitten. His splotched pelt pattern seemed near identical to Poolcloud's, just with rich, brown fur instead of black.

"And, this is Mudkit," Dewleaf said, nuzzling him.

"I definitely can see it," Autumnleap purred. "He's perpetually muddy."

"That excuse will not get him out of any baths though," Poolcloud said.

He purred at his own joke as he curled himself around Dewleaf, resting his chin on her flank so he could gaze down at his kits with adoring eyes.

Dewleaf turned to the next kit in line, the second little she-cat. She was mostly black furred, but was marked with a little white here and there— on her paws, a splash on her chest, and a dab on her muzzle.

"She's Sprucekit," Dewleaf purred.

Frostmask blinked. Although she could still see Dewleaf and Poolcloud in this kitten's appearance, there was actually a different cat that Sprucekit reminded her of most.

"Spruce..." Frostmask mused, purring softly. "She looks a lot like another evergreen friend of ours."

Autumnleap's brow furrowed in confusion for a moment, but his eyes widened as he caught her meaning.

"Wait! Is she named after Pineshade?!" Autumnleap gasped, remembering just in the nick of time to keep his voice quiet as to not wake the kits. *"She* got a kit named after her?! After you said that you wouldn't!?"

"Spruce and Pine are two very different names!" Poolcloud protested, his brow furrowing.

Autumnleap snorted.

"Like *you'd* be able to tell the difference between a spruce tree and pine tree," he grumbled.

"Okay, maybe Sprucekit's name is a *little* inspired by her's," Poolcloud finally admitted, his ears flattening sheepishly. "But, just look at her! She's just like a tiny Pineshade; she's even got her bristly fur, like the needles on the trees. I'm not playing favorites though, I swear. If one of the kits came out ginger like you, I'd have considered a Maplekit."

Autumnleap sighed, acquiescing. He glanced over at the final kit, a smokey grey and white tom.

"So, I can assume that *his* name isn't Maplekit?" Autumnleap teased gently.

Dewleaf glanced over at Poolcloud, letting him take the lead for this one. Poolcloud dipped his head towards his second son, brushing his nose on his kit-soft fur.

"He's Fogkit," he murmured.

Autumnleap blinked.

"Well I can't make fun of you for that," he said.

"It's a wonderful name," Frostmask added with a purr. "I'm sure Fogfur would appreciate it."

"Thank you," Poolcloud said, blinking gratefully up at her.

"We'll let you rest now," Frostmask said, gently touching her muzzle to Poolcloud's head and then Dewleaf's in farewell. "Well done, Dewleaf. They're perfect."

Dewleaf purred in response, carefully tucking her tail around her kits again to keep them warm.

"Stop by again soon," Poolcloud added. "Four kits is a lot! Once they start walking around, we'll need all the help we can get from their aunties and uncles to keep them in line."

Dewleaf huffed softly.

"Speaking of, have either of you seen my littermate?" she asked. "I know Dampfang and I can have our differences, but *stars!* I just gave birth to basically an entire patrol of cats, and he didn't even at least stick his head inside to say, 'Congrats.'"

"He and Pineshade are still out of camp," Poolcloud explained. "I'll find them when they get back."

Frostmask nodded at him, thankful that she could leave passing on the news in Poocloud's capable paws, freeing her to go to sleep. With a couple of murmured goodnights, she and Autumnleap slipped out of the nursery and headed towards the warriors' den and their waiting nests.

The unpleasantness of the gathering was already fading in Frostmask's mind in the face of the miracle that was new life.

The five clans had always been rivals, so Sedgestar was right that they couldn't let them dictate the inner workings of ShadowClan. The other clans would posture and threaten her appointment to

deputy because that's what they had always done, and what they would always do. If Frostmask wasn't rouge-born, they'd surely find something else to say about her. Maybe that she was too young or too inexperienced or too short... who knows?

Regardless of the other clans, when it came down to it, ShadowClan was what mattered most. It was her responsibility to provide for her clan-mates and protect them. Especially when they were as little and helpless as the litter of new kits were

I need to be the best deputy for ShadowClan that I can be. To help keep them safe.

As she and Autumnleap curled up in their nest, anxieties about the next day didn't threaten to keep her awake as they had every night for the past half-moon. Instead, with a new determination filling her, Frostmask fell asleep easily.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Despite Frostmask's newfound interest in her role as deputy, to her disappointment, her change in attitude didn't magically make everything better. Of course, she knew at the core of her heart that that was a naive, kit-like thing to wish for. But, the universe didn't have to put her back in her place *so* harshly. In fact, it sometimes felt like the opposite of what she'd hoped for was true— instead of helping her out, the world was conspiring to make things as difficult as possible for her, as if taunting her for daring to try. It was exhausting, and as the days passed, it chipped away at her resolve bit by bit.

She was still sometimes late with patrol assignments. Her relationship with Sedgestar didn't immediately fix itself. And, Dampfang and his friends were still a nuisance, although no one outright called for her replacement anymore. It seemed that her clan-mates had accepted that Sedgestar changing the position now was impossible— it would make ShadowClan look weak, like they were crumpling to the pressure from the other clans.

That didn't stop Dampfang from still being a constant thorn in Frostmask's side, though. He just did it in slightly subtler ways.

It hadn't even been an entire moon-cycle since Lizardstrike's warriors ceremony, and yet he was already relentlessly pestering her and Sedgestar about making Cedarpaw a warrior. He'd again insisted on meeting with their leader, and so Frostmask found herself in Sedgestar's den with him and Dampfang for what was probably the twelfth time in the past half moon. She sat to Sedgestar's right and slightly behind him, trying her hardest to channel the calm energy Grovepelt always radiated and not let her boredom and irritation show on her face. Dampfang stood in front of her and Sedgestar, his dark form blotting out the little amount of light that made it down the root tunnel.

Frostmask would much rather let Sedgestar deal with Dampfang's complaining by himself while she attended to other things, but her leader insisted that she join him for these meetings. Sedgestar had called it a 'learning experience.'

So here Frostmask was, forcing herself to listen to what Dampfang was saying, even though she doubted it would be any different from the arguments that he'd posed the last several times.

"Cedarpaw fights and hunts just as well as any warrior," Dampfang meowed to Sedgestar. "He deserves to get his full name."

"That may be so, but his sisters haven't yet completed their assessments," Sedgestar responded. "It doesn't seem very fair to them to have him get his warrior name now, when they could join him in only another quarter moon or so."

Dampfang released a short, sharp breath between his fangs, something between a sigh and a hiss.

"And, what if it takes longer than a quarter moon?" Dampfang asked. "Cricketpaw's training has been all mixed up as she's been shuffled between Pineshade and Snakeeyes. Would you punish Cedarpaw for his sisters' and their mentors' failings?"

Defensive anger for Pineshade and Snakeeyes stirred in Frostmask's belly, but she decided it best to remain silent.

"Do you consider Cedarpaw getting his warrior name with his littermates a failure?" Sedgestar posed with a calm blink.

"When he's already ready to be a warrior *now,* yes," Dampfang said with a faint growl. "Come watch one of his training sessions, you'll see what I mean."

"And, what does Cedarpaw think about all this?" Sedgestar asked. "Is he as impatient to be a warrior as you are for him?"

Dampfang's ears flattened.

"So you're refusing to assess his progress?" he demanded. "You didn't have a problem stopping by on practically all of your

grandkits' sessions."

"You didn't answer my question, Dampfang," Sedgestar said.

"You didn't answer *my* question," Dampfang hissed back, his tail starting to lash. "You basically coddled Lizardstrike all through out his training, but you've totally neglected *my* apprentice, who's worked his tail off for this!"

"Do you think Lizardstrike didn't deserve to receive his warrior name?" Sedgestar asked, his voice turning dangerously soft.

You're treading on thin ice, Dampfang. Frostmask thought, shooting him a glance from narrowed eyes.

But, Dampfang had hardly looked at her this whole time.

"I think no one would have been surprised if it took Lizardstrike a bit longer than normal to get his name, given his situation," Dampfang said, surprisingly diplomatically.

He'd also managed to cool some of the anger in his voice, and his lashing tail settled for just twitching.

"But, there's no reason to delay Cedarpaw's."

"His ceremony has not been delayed," Sedgestar said with a sharp huff, his tail starting to flick as his patience came to its end. "He hasn't even reached the standard six moons of apprenticeship. What you are asking for is an *early* ceremony. And, you are not making a very strong case for it."

Dampfang stiffened, his body becoming entirely still.

"Is that your answer then?" Dampfang asked in a low voice.

"Yes," Sedgestar responded, giving a curt nod. "Come back again when you can make a better argument, or when Hollowpaw and Cricketpaw have also completed their assessments. You are dismissed."

Dampfang immediately turned on his heel and exited the cave, his

tail whipping behind him again. Once he'd stomped out of the tunnel, Frostmask glanced at Sedgestar.

"How often do cats normally meet with you like this to complain?" she asked.

Sedgestar's gaze was foggy, but they cleared as he blinked, as if he'd pulled himself out of his thoughts in an attempt to focus in on her again. He gave a slightly strained purr.

"You'll find that it happens more often for some than it does to others," he said distractedly, in a sort of non-answer.

Frostmask's ears slanted back, unhappy that he hadn't really bothered to give her a proper response, but lacking the energy to press harder and try again.

"Can I go now too?" Frostmask asked.

Sedgestar sent her off with a nod, his expression weary. Frostmask quickly rose to her paws and slipped out of the den.

As the morning winded down, the camp grew busier as patrols returned, hauling in large loads of fresh-kill and then staying in camp to eat and rest for sun-high. The weather today was lovely and warm, hinting at the quickly approaching green-leaf, and everyone seemed excited to be outside, sunning themselves and visiting with friends.

Frostmask turned, about to pad around the edge of camp, and almost ran smack into Dampfang. He had lingered at the base of the Oak Tree in the shade of the roots, on the far side of the trunk from Sedgestar's den entrance. Frostmask quickly stepped to move around him, but his gaze snapped to hers.

"Frostmask," he growled, suddenly acknowledging her for the first time this morning. "You need to convince Sedgestar to make Cedarpaw a warrior."

Frostmask sighed, her ears flattening.

"And, what makes you think I can do that?" she asked flatly.

Dampfang stared at her for one long moment like she was stupid.

"Because you're the deputy," he said, sneering slightly at the title.

"But, you heard Sedgestar's answer," Frostmask insisted, her tail flicking with irritation. "Just wait another quarter moon, and Cedarpaw *will* be a warrior. It's not a big deal. Why does it bother you so much to wait a few more days?"

"It's not about what's bothering me," Dampfang growled, his fur bushing out. "It's what Cedarpaw *deserves*. He's worthy of his warrior name."

Frostmask sighed again.

Why did Dampfang insist on having the same conversation a hundred times over? Did he just take that much joy in nagging at her and Sedgestar? It felt like his constant pestering was taking moons off her life.

Maybe that's why Sedgestar looks so tired.

"And, he will get it. In a quarter moon," Frostmask sighed, starting to pad off.

Dampfang released a loud, wordless hiss at her back.

"It's no wonder Sedgestar made you his deputy," he sneered, his voice saturated with rancor. "You're totally spineless."

Frostmask froze, the fur on her shoulders starting to bristle as anger stirred in her gut.

"Excuse me?" she said, turning back towards Dampfang with deliberate slowness, her muscles tensing.

He bared his teeth at her.

"You heard me," he growled. "You want to know why he picked you? It's the same reason he chose Grovepelt all those seasons ago. See, all Sedgestar wants in a deputy is a meek little kit to mew, 'Yes, sir,' at his every command and lick his feet. He got that in

Grovepelt, who loves him like a son and thinks he can do no wrong. But, now that Grovepelt's retired, what better cat for the job than the lowly little rogue Sedgestar raised up from nothing to his second-in-command? Blindly devoted, like *a dog."*

A growl began to rumble in Frostmask's throat.

"You don't know a *thing* about me," she spat, stalking back towards him.

Dampfang released a harsh bark of laughter.

"No, Frostmask. I know *everything* about you," Dampfang said, his purr of bitter humor distorting in his throat into a furious rumble. "I've known you practically your whole life, since the moment your mangy, flea-bitten pelt was dragged into this Clan."

He put on a mocking, high-pitched voice for a moment.

"'I'm the little rogue, Frostmask, but I love ShadowClan. I'm so devoted, so eager to please, to show that I belong here.' Well guess what? *You don't.* All you've done since you've gotten here is weaken the Clan from the inside. If Sedgestar had any sense, he'd have purged you like the blight you are seasons ago."

"You're wrong. I've only helped ShadowClan," Frostmask hissed between her fangs. "Every moment of everyday, with each piece of prey I've brought back to feed our clan-mates, with every drop of blood I've spilled *defending* this Clan."

"I suppose you call having RiverClan, SkyClan, and WindClan snarling at our borders because of *your* appointment to deputy 'helping' as well?" Dampfang sneered, malicious glee flashing in his eyes. "Did it also help the clan when Swoopstrike died because you and Autumnleap bit off more than you could chew during a fight?"

Frostmask dug her claws into the loamy, camp ground.

"Don't you *dare* talk about Swoopstrike," she snarled, a red haze starting to form at the corners of her vision.

"Not to mention the sorts of future disasters that must await

ShadowClan because of your appointment to deputy," Dampfang barreled on. "If you weren't here, Sedgestar would've had to make a sensible choice for deputy. Someone who wouldn't've pissed off the other clans just by existing, and it'd be someone who could also stand up to him. Who'd be able to call him out when he was making frog-brained decisions. Who could keep him from turning ShadowClan into *SedgeClan."*

"Ha. Like you?" Frostmask spat derisively, curling her lip up as if his words reeked like crowfood. "Face it Dampfang, you'll *never* be leader of ShadowClan. No cat here would ever want you as their leader because everyone can see that you're nothing but a spoiled, *petty child,* who just expects to be handed everything he wants in life, without having to work for it at all!"

Dampfang's green eyes blazed with wrath, and he rose to his paws. His muscular shoulders rippled as he crouched down, claws unsheathing.

"How *dare* you, you little b—"

"What's going on?" Pineshade suddenly interrupted, her voice ice-cold.

Frostmask blinked in surprise, abruptly torn out of the haze of anger that'd enfolded her body and honed all her attention towards Dampfang into a single, sharp point like a razor-edged claw. She glanced over at Pineshade. She must have come here looking for them— this little corner of camp, tucked between the back of the Oak Tree and the thorn barrier wasn't exactly a highly trafficked area. But, it was hard to say if Pineshade was here because their voices had risen enough to catch her attention, or if she had simply been wondering where they went.

Pineshade glanced from Dampfang to Frostmask and back, her ears flattening with concern and suspicion as she waited for one of them to answer.

"Nothing," Dampfang growled finally, straightening from his crouch. "We were just having a debate about our different philosophies on leadership. Right, Frostmask?"

His eyes darkened with an unspoken threat as he glowered at her.

"Yeah," Frostmask spat venomously, her tail lashing. "Just a friendly debate."

She whirled around on her heel and stormed off.

"I'm taking Cedarpaw out," she heard Dampfang growl to Pineshade from behind her.

"Now? At sun-high?" Pineshade asked, doubt plain in her voice.

"Yeah," Dampfang growled. "Training at weird times will be a useful experience for him."

Frostmask glanced over her shoulder to see him storm out from behind the Oak Tree, irritably flicking his tail at Cedarpaw from across camp to tell him to follow as he headed straight towards the thorn tunnel. Cedarpaw had been eating a vole with Hollowpaw, but when Dampfang summoned him, he quickly choked down the rest of his food and scrambled after his mentor, leaving his sister to bury the scraps. As the two of them vanished out of camp, Pineshade's voice rang out.

"Frostmask!"

Frostmask didn't stop stalking away, but Pineshade bounded over to her, her brow furrowed and tail twitching.

"Do you want to tell me what actually happened back there?" she asked, searching Frostmask's face with a concerned gaze. "You two looked a heartbeat away from tearing each others fur off!"

Frostmask lashed her tail.

"Don't you believe *your mate* when he says nothing's wrong?" she snarled. "Why bother asking me?"

Pineshade blinked in offense at her tone, her lip curling up slightly.

"Because I'm worried about you, frog-brain, and I know he's lying! He basically just ran out of camp to avoid talking about it!"

Pineshade hissed.

Frostmask heaved out a sharp exhale, trying to calm down. Dampfang had wound her muscles into knots and fury still rolled in her stomach like a raging river, but she really shouldn't snarl at Pineshade. She hadn't *really* done anything wrong.

Besides being Dampfang's mate.

But, that frog-brained decision spanned the past several moons and wasn't something that Frostmask should throw in her face if she wanted to have any sort of productive conversation.

"Okay. I'm sorry," Frostmask grumbled, coming to a stop at the edge of camp. "He just got me really worked up. He..."

Frostmask's voice trailed off into a growl, and she stared down at her feet, flexing her claws. Pineshade stared at her for a moment.

"...He was talking about how you shouldn't be deputy?" Pineshade said for her.

"Yeah... Good guess," Frostmask muttered to the ground.

Pineshade huffed and rolled her eye.

"Not really. It's all he talks about these days," Pineshade growled. "I've been trying to make him stop. You've gotta believe me Frostmask, I'm trying. I've tried everything. I'm *this* close to clawing out his tongue as a last resort."

Frostmask released a soft huff of bitter amusement.

"Yeah, right," she muttered sarcastically.

"Okay, that last thing was a joke," Pineshade admitted, her ears flicking. "But, I meant everything else. You've got my support, Frostmask. I don't agree with him or the other clans. *And,* it's completely stupid to think that our dead clan-mates in StarClan wouldn't support you too. If Dampfang thought about it for a moment, he'd realize that. But, he's too blind with jealousy to see sense. I'll keep arguing with him about it, though, a thousand more

times if I have to."

Frostmask glanced at her out of the corner of her eyes.

"Do you do anything but argue these days?" she asked quietly.

Pineshade grimaced, shifting her weight uneasily. Her gaze flitted away, avoiding Frostmask's eyes.

"It's been a while since we didn't," she confessed in a soft voice.

"Do you even like being around him anymore?" Frostmask pressed. "At all?"

"Frostmask..." Pineshade said, a soft warning in her voice.

Her relationship with Dampfang still seemed to be a forbidden topic of conversation, then.

Frostmask flicked her tail with annoyance, but conceded.

"Alright, we don't have to talk about it," she huffed.

Frostmask inhaled deeply. The majority of her rage had faded, but she was still trying to wash away the stinging aftertaste of anxious energy as her gaze flitted across camp. It was properly sun-high now, and most of ShadowClan was out in camp, relaxing, totally oblivious to the strength of the tension that had just been crackling between Frostmask and Dampfang like lightning.

Frostmask's gaze was drawn towards the nursery, and her heart softened as she spotted Autumnleap lying outside it. His tail-tip flicked back and forth temptingly near the den's entrance, and in the shadows beneath the brambles, four pairs of eyes peered out. They were all completely captivated by the bushy, auburn tail, tracking it as it flicked from left to right and back again.

Frostmask purred quietly, starting to finally, fully calm down.

I should go visit the kits. That will be the perfect thing to take my mind off of Dampfang.

"Want to go see the kits with me?" she invited, glancing back over at Pineshade.

Pineshade blinked uncertainly.

"Have they left the nursery yet? If they're still just wiggling around in their nest, I think I'm good," she said, flicking her ears.

"They're getting there," Frostmask said, starting to lead the way towards the nursery. "I think Autumnleap is trying to coax them out now."

Poolcloud's and Dewleaf's kittens had already reached the age when their ears and eyes had opened, although their eyes were still a murky blue— they hadn't yet settled into their true, adult colors. They'd just started to stumble around and speak rudimentary phrases as well, but they were a bit scared to wander out of the safety of the den and into the wider world.

"That's not a 'yes,'" Pineshade said, although she still padded after Frostmask. "Kits are pretty boring when they're not big enough to do anything."

"They're still cute though!" Frostmask protested with a purr. "Besides, don't you want to check on your namesake?"

Pineshade hummed in thought. Even as she pretended to deliberate though, Frostmask knew that, just by the fact that she was following her, she'd already made up her mind.

"I suppose," Pineshade said finally, her voice teasing. "Sprucekit is obviously the most superior of the kittens."

Frostmask spun around and lightly cuffed one of Pineshade's ears with her paw.

"Pineshade! You can't say that!" she scolded, narrowing her eyes disapprovingly. "It'd crush them to know that you have favorites!"

"They're not old enough to understand what that means!" Pineshade protested, purring as she ducked away from Frostmask, watching her carefully to see if she'd swat at her again. "Besides, I don't even

think that they can hear me from over there."

"They understand more than you'd think," Frostmask warned. "So watch your mouth."

"Okay *mom,"* Pineshade huffed, lolling her tongue out playfully.

Frostmask shook her head in exasperation, but an amused purr rumbled in her throat all the same. They resumed their path to the nursery, and Autumnleap's gaze flicked towards them as they padded over.

"Look who's come to see you!" Autumnleap meowed to the kits from over his shoulder, drawing their attention away from his tail and towards the approaching she-cats.

"Frostmask!" Fogkit exclaimed, although his pronunciation of her name made it sound a bit more like *Frostmast.*

None of the kitten had quite mastered the art of language yet.

Fogkit drew even closer to the den's exit, but he paused just short of the camp's threshold, his grey-and-white tail held high and waving with excitement. His littermates echoed his greeting, crowding around him. Frostmask purred indulgently, her heart warm.

Sprucekit was the first to spot Pineshade behind her, and when she did, she began to hop up and down in place, as if her eagerness made her unable to keep her paws still.

"Pineshade! Pineshade! Pineshade!" Sprucekit squeaked.

Sprucekit's affection for her aunt was obvious, and Frostmask couldn't stop her whiskers from quivering with amusement.

Well, if Pineshade's going to have a favorite, at least it's reciprocated.

A purr began to vibrate in Pineshade's chest, and despite her earlier protests about visiting, she lengthened her stride, over-taking Frostmask to be the first to reach the kittens. She ducked her head down, nuzzling them and purring even louder as the four pounced against her face, batting at the edges of her fur and her whiskers.

"Tell us how you lost your eye again!" Mudkit pleaded to her, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Yeah!" Sprucekit mewed in agreement, swiping at the air with a tiny paw as if she was fighting an equally tiny opponent.

"Pineshade should have never told you that story in the first place!" Poolcloud scolded, his head suddenly emerging from the darkness of the den to glare out at Pineshade.

"Hey, they're the ones that asked about it," Pineshade said with a shrug, her eye bright with mischief as she glanced up at her brother. "What? You want me *to lie* to your kits?"

"You didn't have the share all the gory details!" Poolcloud protested, his brow furrowing. "It's much too morbid for such young kits."

"We're not kits!" Lichenkit argued, her brow furrowing. "Mama says we're little warriors!"

Poolcloud glanced down at her, an affectionate purr starting to rumble in his throat.

"You're mom is just being nice," he said, smoothing down Lichenkit's fur with a soft brush of his paw. "You'll be brave warriors one day, but you've got a lot of growing up to do first."

As Frostmask reached the nursery, Pineshade scooted back to make room for her in the narrow den's entrance, and the kits greeted her just as enthusiastically as they had Pineshade. Mudkit even tried to climb up her long fur to get onto her back.

With her front half sticking inside the nursery, Frostmask could see that the den was empty beside Poolcloud and his kits. Larkfoot and Amberberry were supervising the older litter as they played out in camp, but Frostmask wasn't sure where Dewleaf had gone.

"Speaking of their mom, where is Dewleaf?" Frostmask asked, blinking at Poolcloud curiously.

Mudkit was still tugging on her fur, trying to climb up her side. Frostmask crouched down, allowing the kit to scramble up on her.

He perched on her shoulders, his forepaws resting on the base of her skull as he purred with victory.

"She just went to go for a walk outside camp. I think being cooped up in the den all the time is starting to get to her," Poolcloud said.

"Mama'll be back soon, right?" Sprucekit asked, her eyes wide with a hint of worry.

This was probably the longest the kittens had ever been without their mother so far.

"Of course," Poolcloud soothed, blinking gently at his daughter. "But, while she's gone, you all have Frostmask, Autumnleap, and Pineshade to play with, so you're very lucky."

"Yes! I want a badger ride!" Mudkit declared from his perch on Frostmask's back, wiggling with excitement.

Frostmask twisted her head slightly to peer back at him from out of the corner of her eyes.

"I can't give you a badger ride in the nursery entrance," she said. "We'd have to go outside. Is that okay?"

Mudkit paused, some of his excitement fading as his gaze flickered nervously from Frostmask to Poolcloud as if looking for permission. Poolcloud nodded at him encouragingly, and Mudkit's littermates stared with wide eyes, waiting to see if he'd be the first one willing to exit the den.

"O-okay," Mudkit meowed hesitantly.

Frostmask purred soothingly.

"Alright, hold on!" she said.

Frostmask waited until she felt Mudkit's paws bury deeply into her fur. His claws even lightly pricked at her skin, but they were much too small to do any damage. Once she was sure that he was securely clinging to her shoulders, she carefully backed out of nursery, straightening up after she was clear of the brambles. Although

Frostmask wasn't a particularly strong cat, she still barely noticed Mudkit's weight on her back. At this age, the kits hardly weighed more than scraps of moss.

"Ooo!" Mudkit squeaked with excitement, squirming as he peered around at the camp from his vantage on her shoulders.

Frostmask trotted in a small circle, making sure to keep close to the nursery entrance, so Mudkit wouldn't lose sight of his father or littermates and get scared. Sprucekit, Fogkit, and Lichenkit watched him with wide, eager eyes from the nursery. None emerged to follow him, but all seemed excited at the prospect.

Once Frostmask completed a second circuit, she returned Mudkit to right outside the nursery, crouching down so he could hop off her shoulders in front of the den. Mudkit puffed out his chest, his white and brown fur fluffed up with excitement as he stood on his own four paws outside of the nursery for the first time.

"I did it!" he crowed. "I went outside!"

"You didn't do it!" Lichenkit protested. "Frostmask did everything!"

"I want a badger ride too!" Sprucekit said, ignoring Lichenkit.

She shoved past her and lunged towards Frostmask.

"No! Me next!" Fogkit wailed, also racing to reach Frostmask.

They both hesitated at the den's exit, but only for a heartbeat before they took the plunge and dashed outside, squeaking with excitement as they bounced around Frostmask's paws with Mudkit. Lichenkit's tail twitched in offense, but she padded outside behind them, not hesitating as her paws crossed the threshold, as if she hadn't even been afraid to step outside at all.

After only a moment of being outside, Fogkit seemed to forget his eagerness for a badger ride, and now he pounced on Autumnleap's tail, mauling the fluffy auburn pelt with an enthusiasm that was adorable at his age, but would be absolutely vicious if he was older. Mudkit bounced up to Pineshade, going back to begging for her battle stories. Poolcloud emerged from the nursery to take a seat

right outside the bush and keep a close eye on his kits. He seemed equal parts proud and terrified to see them out of the den for the first time.

"Don't go far!" Poolcloud said, his brow furrowing with worry as he watched them spill out into camp.

"Don't worry," Larkfoot called from across the clearing, her voice warm with affection as she spotted the young kits emerging from the nursery. "They just took their first steps outside. I don't think they'll be climbing the Oak Tree yet."

The older queen's instincts seemed accurate. The kits stuck close to the three warriors and their father, hardly wanting to stray more than three tail-lengths away from the nursery entrance, to Poolcloud's clear relief.

"Badger ride! Badger ride!" Sprucekit chanted, dancing from paw to paw in front of Frostmask.

Unlike, Fogkit, she seemed much more set on it. Autumnleap purred at Sprucekit's begging, his tail still flicking from side to side to make it a more appealing target as Fogkit continued to chase after it.

"I think the deputy has more important things to do than to give you all badger rides," Autumnleap teased, his amber eyes glinting with amusement.

"Nonsense!" Frostmask declared, crouching down so Sprucekit would be able to climb onto her back. "This is definitely the most important thing for me to do right now."

Sprucekit clumsily reared up, placing her paws on Frostmask's side as she prepared to scramble up onto her. But, she hesitated, her expression creasing with confusion.

"Uncle Dampfang says Frostmask's not a real deputy," Sprucekit said.

Frostmask tensed, and Poolcloud, Pineshade, and Autumnleap all froze as well. Autumnleap's tail even stopped flicking for a moment, although Fogkit continued to bat at it.

Annoyance prickled through Frostmask's pelt, but not towards Sprucekit— only Dampfang.

He shouldn't be filling the kits' heads with lies!

"Dampfang must be confused," Poolcloud said slowly, exchanging a quick glance with Frostmask. "Frostmask is the deputy of ShadowClan."

Sprucekit shrugged.

"Okay," she chirped, unbothered.

She scrambled onto Frostmask's shoulders.

"Badger ride!" Sprucekit cheered.

Frostmask complied, slowly trotting around as Sprucekit squeaked with excitement. But, her mood had soured some.

Leave it to Dampfang to ruin things, even when he's not here!

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake, trying to dislodge the thought, but it clung to her like a stubborn cobweb.

It's bad enough that he's so vocal against me by himself and with his friends. But, now he wants to turn these innocent kits against me too?

Frostmask finished Sprucekit's ride and deposited her back by her siblings near the nursery. Sprucekit went to go play with Pineshade, switching places with Mudkit, who hurried over towards Frostmask, tripping over his own paws in his eagerness to get to her.

"I think I'm too tired for anymore badger rides, Mudkit," Frostmask said, stifling a sigh as she lied down by Autumnleap, where Fogkit was still playing with his tail.

But, as soon as the words left her mouth, guilt prodded at her.

I shouldn't let Dampfang ruin the kits' fun too, she scolded herself.

"Okay, maybe I can be convinced to do *one more* ride," she said as

Mudkit reached her.

"No. Not that," he said, his eyes sparkling.

He climbed onto Frostmask's forepaws, nuzzling into her chest fur. A soft purr began to rumble in Frostmask's throat, and she bent her head to rasp her tongue down Mudkit's back.

"Then what do you need, tadpole?" she asked.

Frostmask had picked the endearment up from Dewleaf, who often used it when referring to her litter.

"I wanna be deputy like you when I grow up," Mudkit said, gazing up at her with wide, shining eyes.

Frostmask blinked, her lingering annoyance towards Dampfang driven away by a sudden rush of affection. Purring, she rubbed her face against Mudkit's.

"I think you'd be an *amazing* deputy," she said.

"Really?" Mudkit peeped, his chin raising happily.

"Of course," Frostmask said, nodding solemnly.

The excitement of taking their first steps outside of the den seemed to have tuckered all of the kits out. Still sitting on Frostmask's paws, Mudkit's nuzzled closer to her, his head drooping as he started to doze off. Meanwhile, Sprucekit had curled up next to Pineshade's side. Their matching black pelts mingled together so well, the little spotting of white on Sprucekit was the only clear indication that she was there at all. Even Fogkit had fallen asleep, sprawled out on the ground with Autumnleap's tail-tip still clasped between his paws.

Lichenkit was the only left of the four still awake. She was inspecting the outside of the nursery, staring curiously at the unfriendly, prickly appearance of the thorns that protected the den.

Frostmask gazed down at Mudkit. He was leaned back against her chest, snoring slightly since his head was tilted back at an awkward angle. Not wanting him to wake up with an aching neck, Frostmask

nudged him gently with her muzzle, and he shifted, curling up into a more comfortable position.

A soft, steady purr rumbled from Poolcloud, making Frostmask glance up at him, and they made eye contact.

"You're really good with them," he said.

Frostmask's chest warmed with happiness, but she flicked her ears, dismissing his praise.

"Just as good as Pineshade and Autumnleap," she said.

"They didn't give anyone badger rides," Poolcloud said, shooting a teasing glare at his siblings.

"No one asked us!" Autumnleap jokingly protested. "And, besides, I gave up my tail to be a chew-toy. That's got to count for something. Look, I still have a big, weird-looking tick stuck to me right now."

Autumnleap angled his ears back to indicate Fogkit, who continued sleeping blissfully, his claws tangled in Autumnleap's bushy tail fur.

"If by 'weird-looking tick' you mean *'absolutely adorable kitten,'*" Poolcloud corrected, narrowing his eyes with a playful warning at Autumnleap, "then yes. You do."

"If we're still deciding who's the best aunt or uncle," Pineshade chimed in, "I'd just like to point out that, unlike Autumnleap, *I've* never called any of your kits a blood-leeching parasite."

She bent her head to nuzzle Sprucekit lovingly as if for emphasis, and Poolcloud nodded at her.

"Well that is definitely a point in your and Frostmask's favors," Poolcloud said, his tone solemn, but his eyes sparkling with laughter.

Pineshade's tail curled up in smug delight, and she shot a gloating glance at Autumnleap.

"I was *joking!* Obviously!" Autumnleap huffed, his ears flattening in

a pout.

Poolcloud ignored him, turning his gaze onto Frostmask as he shifted back to seriousness.

"Have you thought about if you'll have kits?" Poolcloud asked.

Frostmask blinked in surprise at the sudden question, and her tail twitched with uncertainty.

Of course she'd considered it. How could she have not with Dewleaf's and Poolcloud's kits in the nursery? But, it wasn't something that she and Autumnleap had discussed in more depth than a passing comment. In fact, she could feel Autumnleap's intent gaze on her this moment, as if he was just as curious about her answer as Poolcloud was.

"I've thought about it," Frostmask said slowly. "But, I'm not sure what my answer is right now. I like kits, but my kits would be—"

Frostmask broke off abruptly, her brow furrowing.

Part SkyClan. 'Rogue-blooded.'

Would any of her kits be as easily loved by everyone in the clan as Dewleaf's and Poolcloud's kits were? Or, would their outsider heritage still stalk them, even with both of their parents in ShadowClan? Frostmask didn't have it in her to doom any of her hypothetical kits to experience the same prejudice she'd faced. Even without them existing, she still loved them too much for that.

Frostmask dropped her eyes from Poolcloud down to Mudkit, tracing the edges of his downy soft kit-fur with her gaze.

"I don't want them to have to experience the same things I did, growing up," Frostmask finally continued, choosing her words carefully.

Frostmask's earliest moons in ShadowClan were a sensitive subject in their group, and one that Frostmask tended to avoid discussing, unless it was just her and Autumnleap alone. She knew that Pineshade still felt guilty about her kit-hood bullying, and

Frostmask didn't like making her feel bad, especially not when she was one of her closest friends now.

"So, I don't know," she concluded.

She glanced back up at the group. Pineshade was carefully avoiding her gaze, instead focusing on picking tiny specks of dirt from Sprucekit's fur, but Frostmask could tell from the backwards slant to her ears, she was uncomfortable. Poolcloud's eyes were round with sympathy as he gazed at her, and Autumnleap gently brushed his tail against her flank.

"You really think your kits would be treated poorly just because you weren't born in ShadowClan?" Poolcloud asked.

"It's possible," Frostmask muttered, dropping her gaze again. "They'd be the kits of a rogue."

"They'd be the kits of ShadowClan's *deputy,"* Autumnleap growled emphatically.

Poolcloud nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, if anything, our clan-mates will be fighting each other to be their mentors, just to get in your good graces," he added.

"I don't know," Pineshade suddenly broke in.

The low mutter of her voice drew Frostmask's attention, but she still didn't make eye-contact with her.

"Just because our clan-mates have accepted Frostmask, doesn't necessarily mean that they'd accept her kits. Cats can be cruel, especially young cats, who are too foolish to know any better."

Pineshade's gaze finally met Frostmask's.

"I know I was," she said, her ears flat with embarrassment.

"Because *someone* was influencing you when you were a kit and an apprentice," Autumnleap grumbled, his eyes narrowing.

Frostmask expected Pineshade to retort back, but she just shifted uneasily, looking away from him.

That was an angle Frostmask hadn't considered— not just Dampfang being against her kits, but him convincing others who might be neutral or supportive otherwise, to be against them as well. He's already tried to tell Sprucekit that Frostmask wasn't a 'real' deputy, so was it really that much of a stretch to imagine that he'd also try to tell them one day that her kits weren't 'real' ShadowClan cats?

"My kits are kind, though," Poolcloud said, sweeping a proud gaze over Lichenkit and his three sleeping kits.

Pineshade arched a brow.

"Aren't all kits born kind?" she asked.

Poolcloud frowned slightly.

"But, they'd listen to me and Dewleaf if we told them to be nice to Frostmask's kits," he argued.

Pineshade exhaled a sharp, incredulous breath.

"As much as I listened to Redclaw and Weaseltail?" she asked.

Poolcloud shifted his paws, having no answer for that. Frostmask's ears twisted back, feeling more disheartened as Pineshade's eye flickered to her and caught sight of her expression.

"But, I'm sure things will be better once the clan has grown more used to you being deputy," Pineshade said, her tone quickly turning supportive. "The grumbling of the other clans will settle down, and in ShadowClan, kits will grow up only knowing you as our deputy. The overall attitude of the clan will shift."

Frostmask's tail-tip twitched slightly. Judging by the way Dampfang just seemed to grow more aggressive to her by the day, at this rate, she wasn't sure if the clan would ever fully accept her as long as he was breathing.

But, she kept that worry to herself. The last thing she needed was to someone overhear her saying the phrase 'as long as Dampfang is breathing,' and then have that get back to him. *Stars,* before she could say 'mouse' Dampfang would be dramatically proclaiming that his life was under threat by the evil rogue Frostmask.

"You're not planning on having kits anytime soon, right?" Pineshade prodded, refocusing her attention.

"Yeah," Frostmask said. "I want to focus on figuring out how to be deputy, before I add figuring out how to be a mom into the mix."

Pineshade nodded.

"That makes sense. So, there's plenty of time for things to get better, and for you to make up your mind," she said. "You could wait for seasons before coming to a final decision. After all, Redclaw and Weaseltail were senior warriors by the time they decided to have a litter."

Frostmask blinked gratefully at Pineshade for her support.

"That's true," she agreed.

"And, look at what great a job Redclaw and Weaseltail did! Poolcloud and I turned out absolutely perfect," Autumnleap joked, puffing out his chest and shooting a teasing glance at Pineshade. "And, Pineshade is... er... *adequate,* I guess."

Pineshade's face immediately scrunched up in offense, and she rumbled a low growl.

"If I didn't have a kit sleeping on my flank, I'd claw your ears right now," she warned.

"No threatening violence to each other in front of the children!" Poolcloud scolded.

"That's *got* to be a point in my favor," Autumnleap said, gazing imploringly at Poolcloud.

Poolcloud sighed.

"Fine," he said. "One point for Autumnleap, and another for Frostmask."

"Yes!" Autumnleap cheered to himself in a loud whisper.

Pineshade scowled at him.

"Not fair. You baited me into saying it," she grumbled.

Poolcloud rolled his eyes in exasperation at his littermates' bickering, but he purred as he glanced at Frostmask.

"For the record though, I think as the point total reflects, you'd make a great mother... Although, that doesn't mean that you *have* to have kits," he added hastily. "But, if you did decide to one day, you'd be good at it."

"Thank you," Frostmask murmured, dipping her head shyly. "You know, you're a pretty good parent yourself. Definitely better than me since you, you know, actually *have* kits."

Poolcloud purred, his gaze warming at her praise.

"Well I better prove that by getting them back into the den to rest," he said. "They're all worn out."

Poolcloud rose to his paws to gather them up, purring softly all the while.

"Poor sleepy kittens," he cooed, scooping Fogkit up first to carry back into the den.

Fogkit barely twitched as Poolcloud padded off with him. Once the kit had finally been removed from Autumnleap's tail, he sighed with relief, languidly swishing it from side as he stretched out his forepaws before rolling onto his back.

"Wake up, eat and play to your heart's content, then go right back to sleep. I wish I had that life," he meowed wistfully, gazing out at Frostmask and Pineshade from upside-down.

"Isn't that exactly what you do already?" Pineshade sniped, her eye

narrowing.

"I'll have you know that I went on a patrol this morning!" Autumnleap huffed offendedly, rolling back onto his stomach. "Tell her, deputy!"

Poolcloud had already taken Sprucekit in as well, and now he returned to get Mudkit from Frostmask. The kit was already sleeping so deeply he didn't stir at all as Poolcloud lifted him by his scruff. Frostmask turned to Autumnleap.

"I know I assigned you to a patrol, but if you actually completed it, instead of say, napping, how am I to know?" she said, blinking with exaggerated innocence.

Autumnleap rolled his eyes.

"My own mate, turned against me!" he groaned dramatically.

"Oh Lichenkit, be careful!" Poolcloud suddenly interrupted, pulling their attention back towards him.

The little blue-grey kitten had drawn even closer to the edge of the nursery, and Poolcloud had sprung forward to stop her from actually touching the side of it. Her nose was less than a whisker's length away from the bush's spiny brambles as she sniffed at them curiously.

"Those thorns are sharp!" Poolcloud scolded.

"I was careful!" Lichenkit protested as Poolcloud scooped her up and carried her back inside the den to the others.

He placed her down on the pile of her drowsy littermates, freeing his mouth from her scruff so he could respond.

"Okay. But, you must be tired too," he said.

"I'm not, Papa!" Lichenkit said stubbornly.

Poolcloud shook his head with an air of exasperated fondness, and he wrapped his fluffy tail around his kits to keep them in place.

"I'm not!" Lichenkit reiterated. "And, I wasn't going to touch thorns!"

Frostmask purred as the other kits stirred at the sound of Lichenkit's protesting, and three more pairs of sleepy eyes peered over the edge of Poolcloud's tail like owlets in a nest.

"You know you won't always be able to stop them from pricking their pelts," Autumnleap added to Poolcloud, gently teasing.

"I can sure try!" Poolcloud protested, curling his tail more tightly around them.

After only a few moments had passed, Sprucekit, Mudkit and Fogkit started to drift back off, and despite her protests, Lichenkit's eyelids begun to droop too.

Frostmask purred and stretched her legs out before rolling over so her fur brushed Autumnleap's. A purr rumbled from Autumnleap to match hers, and Frostmask closed her eyes. With the warm sun beating down on her pelt, it seemed like the perfect time for her to take a nap as well. She could forget about her troubles with Dampfang for a while in the soft embrace of sleep.

It felt like Frostmask had her eyes only closed for a heartbeat before someone was quite loudly clearing their throat in front of her.

Frostmask's eyes blinked open to be greeted by Dustleap, who was staring down at her with the look of mild disdain of someone who had just discovered that their den roof had leaked, and their nest was soaked through.

"Are you planning on sleeping through the evening?" Dustleap asked, his tail-tip flicking with annoyance.

Frostmask's eyes flashed from him and to the sky. She still wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, or if she'd been asleep at all, but it had already passed sun-high. She'd either lost track of time playing with the kits and talking with her friends, or napped for too long. Autumnleap and Pineshade were still hanging out by the nursery too, their eyes closed as if they'd also been sleeping, but they both stirred at the sound of Dustleap's voice.

Hot embarrassment crawled through Frostmask's pelt, and she scrambled to her paws, pushing herself into a sitting position.

"I— uh," she weakly attempted.

"You know WindClan has been more aggressive lately," Dustleap berated, continuing before she could find the words to respond. "We have to be prompt with our patrolling or they'll see it as weakness. When were you going to send out the sunset patrol down the WindClan border?"

Frostmask fidgeted, her fur itching. She felt like an apprentice being scolded by a mentor. But, she was supposed to be the deputy!

"Um, I— I was—" Frostmask floundered, her tongue tripping over itself as her thoughts whirled, still scattered from sleep and from Dustleap's harsh attention as he put her on the spot.

"She already has, frog-brain," Pineshade huffed, suddenly cutting in.

She rose to her paws and arched her back in a deep stretch.

"I'm leading it."

Frostmask blinked, surprised for just a moment before gratitude flooded her instead.

Thank you StarClan for Pineshade!

Frostmask swallowed back a relieved purr. She tried to radiate her thankfulness towards her friend silently, but Pineshade was careful enough that she didn't make eye contact with her and risk giving up the ruse.

Dustleap glanced over at Pineshade as well, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"I didn't know Frostmask could send out patrols in her sleep," he commented snidely.

Pineshade released a brief *mrrow* of amusement.

"You are aware that a cat can close their eyes without sleeping, right Dustleap?" Pineshade asked, arching a brow.

Dustleap blinked, uncertainty starting to seep into his expression as Pineshade spoke with cool confidence. He shuffled his paws, his ears flattening awkwardly.

After a few heartbeats passed and he didn't respond, Pineshade turned to glance over at where Cricketpaw was grooming in front of the apprentices' den a few fox-lengths away. She called her apprentice over to her before turning back to Dustleap.

"If you have nothing better to do than to just stand there and growl at our deputy, you can join us," Pineshade added drily. "Or, would you like to apologize to Frostmask first?"

Dustleap scowled irritably at that, but he softened as Cricketpaw came trotting over.

"Yeah, come with us, Dustleap! It'll be fun," Cricketpaw meowed, blinking up at him.

"...Alright," Dustleap gave in, affectionately brushing his muzzle against his daughter's forehead.

To Frostmask's surprise, Dustleap then obeyed Pineshade and turned to her.

"I'm sorry," he meowed, his tone genuine. "I didn't see you assign anyone to the patrols."

Frostmask nodded, doing her absolute best to keep her expression neutral so that Dustleap wouldn't know that Pineshade was telling him nothing but a load of snake-dung.

"It's alright," she said. "Make sure that WindClan knows that ShadowClan isn't to be trifled with, right?"

He nodded.

"Of course," Dustleap said.

"Mosspounce, want to come too?" Pineshade called, glancing at the nearby she-cat.

Mosspounce's mouth opened widely in a toothy yawn, but she rose to her paws without complaint.

"Sure!" She trotted over.

As the four cats began to make their way over to the thorn barrier, Frostmask discreetly stepped closer to Pineshade so she could whisper in her ear, still deeply grateful for her quick thinking.

"Thank you. *Thank you,"* she said in a voice barely above a breath. "You know that you're my best friend, right?"

Pineshade's whiskers twitched, amusement sparkling in her eye.

"I thought that was Autumnleap," she whispered back.

"He didn't save my pelt just now," Frostmask responded drily with a flick of her tail. "Although, asking Dustleap for that apology was a bit much."

Pineshade gave her head an almost imperceptible shake.

"No. They need to learn respect," she whispered. "And, I'll claw it into them if necessary."

Frostmask blinked, her brow furrowing.

By making them apologize when they're totally right, and I'm wrong?

She huffed in quiet exasperation, but Pineshade just playfully batted her ear with a paw and walked off, catching up with her patrol at the thorn tunnel and then taking the lead as she dived into the dark hole in the barrier.

As Frostmask gazed after them, she was suddenly struck by the ease in which Pineshade had stepped up to fill the gap of Frostmask's stammering and command their clan-mates. She'd so easily asked for Dustleap, a warrior much more senior than them, to apologize to Frostmask, and she'd somehow not made him furious as she did

so.

Frostmask had known that Pineshade had a natural talent for leadership since their apprentice days, but it seemed all the more stark now in comparison to Frostmask's ineptitude.

Frostmask's ears flattened as embarrassment rushed through her again, and she sent another glance up at the sky and the decidedly lowering sun.

How could she have missed the proper time to assign patrols, *again?* She'd hardly ever been late to training as an apprentice or patrol assignments when she was just a warrior. Shouldn't this practically be instinct by now?

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

But, before I had other cats keeping me accountable— I didn't want to make Swoopstrike angry, or disappoint Grovepelt. Now, though I just have myself to count on. And, the clan, of course, but it's kinda hard for that to motivate me when I know a bunch of them don't even want me doing it...

Frostmask sighed, her shoulders sagging slightly.

At least Dampfang is already out of camp. He would have been so much worse than Dustleap. Although I wouldn't have even been able to deal with Dustleap if it wasn't for Pineshade... She should've been made deputy instead.

Heavy disappointment sunk in Frostmask's belly. But, it was hard to tease apart if the disappointment was because she was failing her clan as their deputy, or if it was disappointment that Pineshade *hadn't* been chosen for deputy...

But, things would be so much simpler if she had! Maybe Dampfang would have still been jealous that he wasn't deputy, but he'd be nowhere near as terrible to her as he was being to Frostmask. The other clans wouldn't have any grounds to complain. *And,* Pineshade could do the standard deputy duties better than Frostmask.

Why didn't Sedgestar pick her?

Frostmask gave her head a small shake, trying to put a stop to the thoughts.

Wishing that Pineshade had been chosen was as useless as wishing that the sky was yellow instead of blue. Whatever Sedgestar's reasoning, he'd picked Frostmask instead, and it was too late to do anything about it. She just had to deal with it. And, so did everyone else.

Frostmask rose to her paws, glancing over at Autumnleap.

"I better go send out the other patrols since Pineshade isn't here to save my tail again," she meowed.

Autumnleap blinked in surprise.

"You mean you *didn't* ask her to lead that patrol?" he asked.

"She was that convincing, huh?" Frostmask asked, faint dry humor in her mew.

He frowned slightly.

"Well, I didn't know! I was sleeping," Autumnleap said, his voice edged with embarrassment that he'd been fooled.

Frostmask huffed quietly.

"Yeah. So was I," she murmured.

Frostmask turned to face her clan-mates, most of who were still scattered out in camp, lying around, and she squared her shoulders.

Maybe she didn't have Grovepelt or Swoopstrike motivating her anymore, and maybe a lot of her clan-mates didn't like her as deputy. But, she still had cats who were counting on her— her friends, Lizardstrike, the kits... So, no matter how difficult this was, how many times she'd trip over her own paws and mess up, she had to keep toiling at it.

"Hey everyone! Come gather up for sunset patrol assignments," she called.

Whispers in the Night

Frostmask found herself wishing for the new-moon or an overcast sky as she slunk towards Fourtrees. The half-moon night made the forest too bright, and that made what she was doing feel worse, as if the light had ways of illuminating the wrongness of her, the deputy of ShadowClan, meeting with the deputy of a rival clan. The darkness was better— easier to hide not only from others, but also from her own guilt.

Frostmask gave her ears a shake, trying to clear her head as she reached the lip of the slope that ran down to Fourtrees. Moving swiftly but silently, she descended the hill, but when she reached the gathering clearing, she didn't enter it. Instead, she stuck to the areas of dense undergrowth that ringed it, eventually settling in under a holly bush where she was sheltered by the thickly netted branches.

She didn't have to wait long until some nearby undergrowth gently rustled. Frostmask held stock-still, waiting to see what would emerge. Thankfully, it was only Paledusk, his green eyes glowing softly in the moonlight as he glanced around.

Frostmask silently poked her head out from under the bush. The motion caught his attention, and Paledusk's eyes quickly flashed to her. Recognition flickered in his gaze, and Paledusk relaxed, turning and padding over to her while Frostmask retracted back into the safety of the branches.

"Worried about someone seeing us?" Paledusk asked in a hushed voice as he slipped under the bush beside her.

"A bit," Frostmask admitted, her twitching tail-tip betraying her unease. "It is pretty bright out tonight. Why did you ask to meet at the half-moon instead of the new-moon?"

"It's best to change things up," Paledusk said, crouching down and wrapping his thick-furred tail around his body as he settled in. "Lest

someone notice a pattern."

One of Frostmask's ears twitched.

Well... he's not wrong.

She nodded in understanding. For a beat, Paledusk just gazed at her, and his eyes narrowed slightly as some sort of unpleasant emotion crept into them.

"I wasn't sure if you'd meet me here tonight. I didn't even know if you heard me at the gathering, since things were so chaotic," he said. "How are you holding up after that? The other clans weren't exactly kind to say the least."

Frostmask huffed softly, flicking her tail.

"I've heard worse," she said.

If something like that had happened to her when she'd been younger; if the other leaders protested her being an apprentice or even becoming a warrior, Frostmask knew their words would have stuck more in her mind— burying themselves in like stubborn thorns and painfully nettling her everyday. Of course the entire disaster of a gathering was still horribly embarrassing, but, with the perspective Frostmask had gained in the past few seasons, she couldn't find it in herself to truly care what the other clans whispered behind her back.

Despite the slight increase in hostility at the WindClan border, Sedgestar still believed that the other leaders wouldn't act on their threats. As long as that remained true, then no harm should come to ShadowClan for her appointment to deputy, and their words were nothing more than the howling of the wind. Unpleasant, mortifying howling... but ultimately toothless.

Paledusk shook his head.

"Still, you didn't deserve any of that. I'm continuously aggravated by Fennelstar's reaction." His ears angled back as his expression darkened. "I can't believe he'd call *my* kit vermin."

Frostmask arched a brow.

"Why wouldn't he? He doesn't know that I'm your kit," Frostmask pointed out matter-of-factly before she froze, struck by a sudden, fearful thought.

Her eyes flew to Paledusk's.

"Wait. You didn't tell him, right? He doesn't know?" she asked, her chest clenching with anxiety.

"No. No one knows," Paledusk assured with a blink, and Frostmask immediately relaxed.

Paledusk gave his head a small shake.

"And, yes. You're right, of course," he muttered. "But, it still wasn't pleasant for me to listen to. I'm sorry that you had to go through that."

Frostmask's ears flicked again. She couldn't exactly pin down why, but hearing Paledusk expressing his sympathy made her a bit uncomfortable. She wished that he wouldn't dwell on the embarrassing event.

Can't we just pretend like it didn't happen?

"Hopefully the worse is behind us now though," Frostmask murmured, trying to turn the conversation away from the topic. "Obviously it came as a surprise to all the clans. But, by next gathering, everyone will have had a moon to adjust to the idea."

"Yes," Paledusk said, glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes. "Speaking of adjusting, how are things for you in ShadowClan? Improving? I remember that at the gathering, you were having trouble with some of your clan-mates respecting your authority."

Frostmask hummed noncommittally, flicking her ears.

Paledusk had turned his focus away from the gathering, but he still apparently wanted to talk about her being deputy.

Although, it's only natural that he's curious. Frostmask mused. *It is a big event, after all.*

"It's a work in progress," she said, answering him. "Dampfang is still difficult. Everyone else, though, is getting a bit better."

Although, for the past couple of days, even Dampfang had been pacified somewhat since Sedgestar had finally given into his request to make his apprentice, the newly named Cedarfur, a warrior, even though his littermates hadn't yet completed their assessments. When Frostmask had asked him why he'd done it, Sedgestar had simply said that Cedarfur was ready, but privately Frostmask wondered if Sedgestar had noticed Dampfang's increasing displeasure towards his leadership and decided that the best course of action was to appease him to smooth things over.

"Hm, yes, that's good," Paledusk said.

He blinked thoughtfully, a distant look in his eyes as if his mind was on something else. After a heartbeat, his green gaze sharpened and focused on her again.

"I have been wondering about something though. Would you be willing to indulge my curiosity?" he asked.

Frostmask's ears angled back slightly as a bit of wariness stirred in her chest, brought on by the intensity in his gaze.

"It depends... what are you curious about?" she asked.

Paledusk purred suddenly, some of the intensity in his eyes fading.

"Ah, there's the classic ShadowClan secrecy," he teased lightly, arching a brow. "I'd thought we'd moved past that."

"You brought it to my attention, but that doesn't mean that I've moved past it," Frostmask corrected, twitching her whiskers in a hint of dry humor.

Paledusk tilted his head to the side, amusement still glimmering in his eyes at her evasiveness.

"So I shall ask it, and you'll tell me if you cannot answer?" Paledusk asked.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she grew serious.

"You must understand that I need to watch my words now more than ever before," she pointed out. "After all, I'm ShadowClan's deputy."

Paledusk nodded, turning serious again as well.

"Yes, that's just it— you being deputy. Why are you deputy?" he asked, his gaze very intent. "Of course, I'm not doubting your merits; those are obvious. But, what I'm wondering is, why did *Sedgestar* choose you? Last time we met, you talked about your relationship with him as if it was quite strained— that he did not trust you, and you did not trust him. For good reason. It just seems surprising to me that if what you said was true, that he'd want to pick you."

Frostmask shifted slightly, glancing down at her paws as she hesitated.

Paledusk's insight had cut right to the heart of the matter of her deputyship; the part of it that brought her the most unease. On one paw, she wasn't sure if she should discuss such sensitive, ShadowClan matters with a rival Clan's deputy. But, on the other paw, it was relieving in a way to hear him echo her own worries, to reassure her that her anxieties weren't just all in her head. Would it be wrong to talk about it with him? Admit that there was division in ShadowClan's leadership? What if Paledusk accidentally let that slip to Fennelstar, making the SkyClan leader think that ShadowClan was weak?

But, that can't truly be notable because anytime a Clan gains a new deputy, there must be some destabilization, right? Since any new leader and deputy combination need to get used to working together.

It might even be helpful to hear Paledusk's perspective... after all, he was the only one besides Frostmask herself who understood the full extent of her situation. Of course Autumnleap knew that

Sedgestar had accused her of betraying ShadowClan, but he didn't know the truth of *why*. He thought it was because her mother was a rogue, not because her father was a SkyClan cat. Paledusk was the only cat who knew the full picture, and so he was the one who could offer the best advice and insights... If he could help give clarity to Frostmask about her relationship with Sedgestar, then that must be better for ShadowClan in the long run, right?

"I don't know. It came as just as much a surprise to me then as it does to you now," Frostmask finally admitted. "I didn't know that Grovepelt was retiring, and I certainly didn't know that Sedgestar would choose me to replace him. I don't... I hadn't thought that Sedgestar would've trusted me enough with the position."

Paledusk rotated his head to the side like an owl, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Do you think that could be the reason he made you deputy?" he asked. "Because he didn't trust you? 'Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer?' That sort of thing?"

Frostmask huffed, sliding her gaze over to stare at Paledusk from out of the corner of her eyes.

"How frog-brained would a cat have to be to make their enemy their successor to the Clan?" she pointed out. "Sedgestar is many things, but stupid isn't one of them."

Paledusk's whiskers twitched with amusement, and he bowed his head slightly in concession.

"Quite right, good point," he meowed. "...Then what could be the reason?"

Frostmask shrugged.

"I wish I knew," she muttered, turning her gaze back to her paws.

When Paledusk didn't respond, she glanced over at him again. But, it seemed like Paledusk had hardly heard her. His gaze had grown foggy as he'd lost himself in his thoughts.

"He must also see your merits," Paledusk said in a quiet murmur. "He must see your merits and believe you can be rehabilitated."

Frostmask blinked, her brow furrowing with equal parts confusion and unease.

"Rehabilitated? What do you mean by that?" she asked, trying to stop her shoulder fur from bristling.

Paledusk blinked, his gaze coming back into focus as he steadily met his eyes to hers.

"Perhaps he believes you could be a good deputy and a good leader, if only your 'flaws' are reworked or removed," he said in a calm voice. "I mean... there must have been *something* that led him to assume that you'd betrayed ShadowClan those moons ago, right?"

Frostmask stiffened as icy uncertainty wormed its way into her gut, and she just blinked instead of replying.

Is that what all of Sedgestar's training is really for? Is Sedgestar really trying to help me, or is he trying to "fix" me?

"...What do you think these 'flaws' are?" Frostmask asked warily.

Paledusk blinked and gave his head a small shake.

"I don't know since they are not obvious to me. They may not even be anything real at all, but just aspects of you that Sedgestar has constructed in his head from prejudice... Illusions," he said.

Frostmask shifted, glancing back out at the harsh moonlight again as that same pinprick of guilt from earlier returned.

"Have I done something which makes me seem untrustworthy?" Frostmask murmured, speaking half to herself.

"I doubt it, based on the irrationality of Sedgestar's basis for accusing you originally," Paledusk said simply. "But, when it comes down to it, I think you're the only one who could answer that."

Frostmask blinked and looked over at him.

"I mean, I don't think I have... Unless Sedgestar somehow found out that we were meeting," she said in a quiet voice. "I don't think that's likely, but if he did, he would..."

Frostmask's voice trailed off, unable to even finish the idea in her mind.

She wasn't sure if she truly knew what Sedgestar was capable of if he found out she'd 'betrayed' ShadowClan again, but this time actually had a justifiable reason to think so.

Although it's not like I'm actually doing any harm by meeting with Paledusk. She argued with herself. *I haven't given away ShadowClan secrets, right? I just want to get to know my kin. But, how could Sedgestar ever understand that? His family is all in ShadowClan.*

"Would you like us to put an end to our meetings?" Paledusk asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

Frostmask met his eyes to find his gaze unreadable, and his expression carefully neutral. She shook her head, digging her toes into the damp earth beneath her as her resolve hardened.

"We aren't doing any harm," she reiterated to herself. "It feels like Sedgestar already controls so many aspects of my life back at camp. Why can't I just have this one thing for myself?"

Paledusk's impassive look melted away as his expression softened, and he dipped his head.

"I would understand if you didn't, but I am glad that you want to continue to meet," he said. "And, I don't know if this means anything coming from me..."

Hesitantly, Paledusk uncurled his tail from around his body to instead brush it lightly against her side in a sort of comforting gesture.

"But, I think that you will be an excellent deputy for ShadowClan, regardless of Sedgestar's reasoning or what the other clans think," he said. "You *deserve* the role."

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

'*Deserve?' Do I really?*

She opened her jaws to protest, but Paledusk quickly shook his head to quiet her before she could say anything, continuing.

"You deserve it because you are the most loyal cat in ShadowClan," he said, his tone deep and earnest. "Because you *chose* ShadowClan. It's easy for the others— your clan-mates who were born there, who have their kin there. They've just been buoyed down the river, pulled along by the current, while you've had to swim upstream. And, yet... you've proven yourself to be one of best at it, despite the disadvantages they've placed on you."

Frostmask met Paledusk's eyes and blinked with surprise to see his gaze glowed with gentle affection. She'd seen Paledusk angry and cold, and curious and charming, but she couldn't recall him ever looking at her with such warmth before. She bowed her head, suddenly a bit embarrassed by it, but at the same time, her emotions felt more at ease.

"Thank you," Frostmask murmured, still looking down at her paws. "I do appreciate you saying so... Although maybe for tonight, can we talk about something else, besides me becoming deputy?"

Paledusk blinked in surprise.

"Do you think it's not significant enough to warrant discussion?" he asked, although a slight teasing tone edged his words. "If that's the case, then I'm sure I'd be shocked to know what you do deem important enough to talk about."

"It's not that," Frostmask said with a soft huff of amusement. "It's just... we have so little time to meet, I'd rather not just spend it all talking about myself."

Paledusk nodded in understanding.

"Then what would you like to talk about?" he asked, tucking his tail closer to himself again.

"Perhaps you could tell me more about May?" Frostmask asked, blinking at him hopefully. "You did promise you would last time."

"I suppose I did," Paledusk said good-naturedly, a purr rumbling to life in his throat. "I know that your mother would be proud of you, if she could see you now."

Frostmask's ears jutted up eagerly, his words igniting an idea in her mind.

"Do you think she can?" she asked. "I mean... can she see me now?"

Paledusk blinked, his brow furrowing slightly with confusion as his purr quieted. Frostmask glanced away from him, her ears warming as she suddenly felt a bit like a foolish little kit, wishing for the impossible.

"I was just... What happened to May, after she died I mean, is just something that I wonder about sometimes..." she muttered to her paws. "And, especially after the last gathering, when the leaders were talking about StarClan, it's just been on my mind more. I know she couldn't have gone to StarClan since she didn't have a proper death ceremony. But, could her spirit still be around, maybe on earth? Willowstar and Rabbitstar did say that during the solstices and equinoxes, the connection between us and the spirits is most strong... So could she, at least, on those days see me... Maybe?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure what it's like in ShadowClan, but unlike RiverClan and WindClan, in SkyClan, normal warriors don't concern themselves with the matters of StarClan and spirits," Paledusk said, his voice firm but not unkind. "I tend to leave that to the medicine cats... I don't think on it all that much."

"Oh, okay. That makes sense," Frostmask said, but she still couldn't stop her stomach from dropping in disappointment.

A beat of silence stretched between them.

"...But let's talk about something more pleasant," Paledusk continued, his tone coaxing as he seemed to try to pull her out of her melancholy. "How about I tell you a story about her?"

He paused for a moment in thought.

"How about I tell you how Slatewhisker and May first met?"

Frostmask's ears pricked up, and she glanced over at him again.

"I think that sounds interesting," she said, doing her best to put thoughts about the fate of her mother's spirit out of her mind.

Paledusk purred.

"Alright then," he began. "Many seasons ago, some rogues joined forces with each other in the two-leg place, forming a group which rivaled a clan in size, and they started causing trouble for SkyClan. Not only did they make patrolling the two-leg place near impossible, but they also harried us on our border there, trespassing, stealing prey, attacking border patrols. Fennelstar was irate. He didn't just want the rogues to stop harassing us on our borders, he wanted them *eradicated."*

Frostmask swallowed, her stomach swirling with sudden nervousness.

Does Fennelstar really want to wipe out rogues so badly? Maybe his declaration at the gathering about me wasn't all for show...

Paledusk opened is jaws to continue his story, but Frostmask broke in before he could.

"Does Fennelstar hate all rogues like that?" she asked in a soft voice. "Or just those ones?"

Paledusk's green eyes softened, and Frostmask knew that he had guessed that she was talking about herself.

"All of them," he said quietly. "It's part of the reason that it would have been impossible for May to join SkyClan, assuming that she'd wanted to, of course. But, don't worry."

Paledusk lightly touched his tail-tip to her shoulder again.

"You're right to be concerned about Fennelstar, but as long as I'm

deputy, I'll ensure that he does no harm to you because of your rogue heritage," Paledusk promised.

Frostmask twisted her ears back uncertainly.

"...You'd go against your leader for me?" she asked after a moment of hesitation.

Paledusk lifted his brows.

"Not all of SkyClan feels the way Fennelstar does," he pointed out. "Should a clan follow a leader who is not acting in accordance with the majority of the Clan's wishes?"

Frostmask's tail flicked as she mulled his question over.

"I don't know..." she murmured.

"Well it's something that you should start thinking about," Paledusk said with a gentle blink of encouragement. "Now that you're deputy."

"Yeah, I guess," Frostmask muttered, her brow furrowing. "But, why does Fennelstar hate *all* rogues? It's not like May did anything to him, right?"

"His reasoning is not really because of anything a particular rogue has done," Paledusk explained. "He more hates rogues for what they represent— their connection to two-legs specifically."

"Two-legs?" Frostmask echoed, the furrow in her brow deepening with confusion. "But, what do rogues have to do with two-legs? They aren't kitty-pets; they live away from two-legs."

Paledusk angled an ear towards her.

"But, nine times out of ten, where do rogues come from? The two-leg place. Rogues, kitty-pets, loners— *anything* the two-legs touch, Fennelstar despises."

"But, then why does he hate the two-legs?" Frostmask insisted. "What have they ever done to him?"

A soft purr of amusement vibrated in Paledusk's chest.

"I'm sure you've heard stories about them, but have you ever *seen* a two-leg, Frostmask?" he asked suddenly. "With your own eyes?"

"I've caught glimpses of them inside monsters," Frostmask said, blinking in thought. "And, I saw one once from a distance at the Carrionplace."

Paledusk nodded.

"You've seen a two-leg outside of a monster exactly once in your life," Paledusk said. "Do you know how often a SkyClan cat sees two-legs, once they become an apprentice and leave the camp? *Daily."*

"Daily?" Frostmask echoed, her eyes widening with surprise. "I know you've said that SkyClan sometimes patrols the two-leg place. But, even outside it?"

"Yes," Paledusk said, his face creasing seriously. "Even from the edges of the woods. And, two-legs are bothersome creatures. They make lots of noise. They bring dogs. Start fires. Everywhere two-legs go, destruction follows."

"...They can even tear down trees, right?" Frostmask murmured, her mind drifting back to a lesson she learned a long time ago, when she first became an apprentice. "Grovepelt told me that when he was young, two-legs made the thunderpath between ThunderClan and ShadowClan, and their destruction scared off prey for a season."

Something flashed in Paledusk's gaze too quickly for Frostmask to identity.

"Yes," he said a bit curtly, and Frostmask blinked, suddenly reminded of another memory— this one from when she was a newly made warrior.

When she'd gone on a hunt in SkyClan territory, she'd overheard a private meeting between Paledusk and the RiverClan deputy, Perchpelt. At the time, the alliance between SkyClan and RiverClan was what stuck in her head as the most important aspect of that

conversation. But, the evasive look that had just flashed in Paledusk's eyes as she talked about two-legs tearing down trees had reminded her of something else she'd overheard then— something about two-legs destroying parts of SkyClan's forest.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as these pieces of information clicked together in her mind.

Have the two-legs destroyed a part of SkyClan's territory and scared off their prey, like they did all those seasons ago when they made the thunderpath in ShadowClan's territory? Is that why SkyClan was so desperate to claim part of ThunderClan's territory before the worst of leaf-bare set in?

Frostmask blinked.

Isn't it strange that Paledusk has never mentioned it to me before, though? I mean, I doubt I would have, if I was in his paws, but he is always saying that I'm unnecessarily secretive— that SkyClan does not care to hide things like ShadowClan...

Frostmask gave her head a tiny shake.

*All cats **must** keep some secrets though, especially when it comes to protecting their clan. It'd be foolish to think that Paledusk is always telling me the truth about everything.*

Frostmask's shoulders loosened slightly. Even though she hadn't felt particularly bad about omitting information when speaking to him before, it still was oddly reassuring to know that Paledusk was keeping things from her too. At least she knew that they were on equal footing now.

"All of these are unfortunate side-effects of two-legs," Paledusk continued, pulling her out of her thoughts. "And, to Fennelstar at least, rogues are another one of them. Anyway though, we are getting off track from the tale. Where was I..."

"You were just saying that Fennelstar wanted something done about the rogues," Frostmask chimed in.

"Right," Paledusk said with a grateful blink to her. "But, we didn't

know anything about how these rogues worked. Did they patrol regularly? Did they camp together like a clan? If so where was their camp? We needed more information before we could plan any large-scale attack. Fennelstar decided he would send cats out into the two-leg place in order to retrieve reconnaissance. But, these cats would have to go out alone. With the rogues causing such trouble, we didn't have enough cats to afford full patrols in the two-leg place while defending our own borders, and a single cat would be much easier for the rogues to miss than a large group."

Frostmask paws prickled. If the rogues were really as concerning as Paledusk made them sound, these solo patrols into their territory must have been quite dangerous.

"Did you ever go on one of those missions?" Frostmask asked.

"Of course. Once or twice," Paledusk said, flicking his ears disinterestedly. "But, this story is about the time Slatewhisker went on the mission."

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"But, didn't you once tell me that Slatewhisker wanted peace between the rogues and SkyClan? Isn't that why he died, when he went to talk with them and they ambushed him?" she asked. "Why would he go on a mission to help eradicate them if he didn't want the groups to fight?"

"Yes, he did, and it was. But, this story happened moons before that," Paledusk meowed patiently, answering each of her questions in turn. "Slatewhisker changed his mind. At this point, though, he believed the rogues to be as bloodthirsty as the rest of us did. Although, no one in SkyClan really knew much about them at all; that's why we needed these missions."

"Right..." Frostmask said, but her brow remained furrowed. "But, why did Slatewhisker change his mind? I mean, clearly the rogues were pretty bad since they killed him, but if they also seemed that bloodthirsty in the beginning then why would he—"

"Would you like to hear that story or this one?" Paledusk

interrupted, his voice still calm, but a slight edge entered his tone. "As you said, we only have so much time together, and the night is wearing on. I can tell you that one, but if you'd like to hear the end of this story about him and May, we don't have time to waste on more tangents."

Frostmask's ears warmed at Paledusk's reprimand, and she bowed her head to rasp her tongue through her chest fur to hide her embarrassment.

"Sorry, you're right," she said. "I'd like to keep hearing the one about May."

After a heartbeat, Paledusk purred quietly, softening his somewhat sharp words.

"I don't mind your curiosity," he said. "But, now just isn't the time."

Frostmask nodded, blinking at Paledusk expectantly as she waited for him to continue. Paledusk cleared his throat and flicked his ears as he reorientated himself.

"Yes, so Slatewhisker was on one of these missions into the two-leg place," Paledusk said, easily picking up the story again. "He went far deeper into the two-leg place than most other warriors had ventured before, on the trail of the rogues. But, little did he know that the rogues were also on the trail of him... As he rounded a corner of the thunderpath, he found himself at a dead-end. On either side of him were two-leg dens, and in front of him, a wall made up of smooth stone."

Paledusk's body stiffened as he paused for effect, completely still except for his tail-tip snapping back and forth in tense little flicks.

Frostmask swallowed back a sudden purr at Paledusk's theatrics.

He's even more dramatic than most elders are when telling a story!

"And, then what happened?" Frostmask prodded before the pause could go on too long, guessing that Paledusk must be waiting for some sign of encouragement from her.

That seemed to be enough, since Paledusk quickly leaned towards her, unable to restrain his eagerness.

"Slatewhisker turned around, only to find his exit blocked by a patrol of rogues!" he growled.

Frostmask indulged Paledusk with a dramatic gasp at the reveal, prompting Paledusk to blink in surprise for a moment before his gaze narrowed.

"Do I detect facetiousness?" he asked, his voice stern but amusement briefly flashed in his eyes.

Frostmask shook her head.

"Oh no, I'm taking the story very seriously," she responded sincerely.

After all, it was true. It wasn't the story she found amusing, but rather Paledusk's way of telling it.

"If you don't like it, I can stop," Paledusk threatened, arching a brow.

"I do like it, and I'm very invested in your story-telling. Please continue," Frostmask said with a purr, meeting his eyes with a gaze as earnest as she could manage.

Paledusk treated her to one final skeptical look, before he sighed in exasperation.

"StarClan, it's like you're turning into your mother," he muttered under his breath.

Frostmask's ears pricked with delight at this new piece of information, her purr vibrating louder in her throat.

Paledusk finally acquiesced to her request to continue, but the faint amusement in his expression faded as he begun speaking again.

"The rogues cornered Slatewhisker," Paledusk said, his lip curling up in a snarl and his eyes darkening as if he could see the cats in

front of him now, threatening his brother. "He would have to fight his way through six cats, an impossible task, or risk being taken prisoner... Or worse. First he tried to run though, of course. He turned away from them and fled down the thunderpath as far as he could, hoping he could get over the wall, but as he feared, the stone was too smooth. There were no paw-holds to be found, and the wall was too high for him to jump onto.

"Slatewhisker wouldn't be taken without a fight, though. So he turned to face the rogues, but just when it seemed like they were going to pounce on him and tear him to shreds, someone called down to Slatewhisker from the top of the wall. 'Over here! Climb this!' the voice said. Slatewhisker glanced over and saw in one of the shadowy corners between the wall and the side of the two-leg den, a long structure spanning the length from the ground to the top of the two-leg den. It was roughly the height and width of a sapling, but instead of wood, it was made from one of the two-legs' strange metallic substances."

Paledusk leaned back slightly, satisfaction flickering in his eyes.

"It was a long climb and totally vertical. A cat can't dig into this metallic material like wood, but this structure did have ridges, which could offer holds if one was careful enough with hooking their claws in. Still, it would be a difficult for most cats. But, of course, it would be of no consequence for Slatewhisker, since we move as easily through the trees as others move on the ground," Paledusk said.

Frostmask blinked, wondering if he was including her in that 'we,' but she couldn't think on it much because Paledusk was already continuing the story.

"Slatewhisker sprung and ducked and dodged past the attacking rouges, reaching the structure. Then he scurried up to the top of the den, leaving the rogues on the ground beneath him," Paledusk said. "And, there on the roof, he was greeted by the cat who had called out to him, aiding him in escaping."

"May," Frostmask guessed, her fur prickling with excitement.

Her mother may not have been a clan-cat, but from the sound of it, she was as brave, noble, and clever as any warrior, maybe even moreso. After all, even though Slatewhisker had been a complete stranger to her at the time, she'd still helped him to safety, probably saving his life!

Paledusk nodded, confirming her guess.

"Yes. It was, of course, May. Although she did not yet tell Slatewhisker her name. In fact, he barely had time to thank her before she warned him that they should leave this place before the rogues managed to figure out a way after them. After Slatewhisker told May that he was from the forest, she agreed to help him return there. So, she navigated them back to the edge of the two-leg place while keeping them high up to avoid the rogues. They would leap or run from roof to roof, wall to wall, their paws barely touching the ground the entire time."

Frostmask blinked, trying to imagine her mother soaring from the top of one two-leg den to the other. But, it was hard to conjure a clear mental image— truthfully, she'd only seen glimpses of the two-leg place from far off. Still though, the way Paledusk described May climbing and jumping made it seem like it was a sight to behold.

Maybe I get my climbing abilities not just from my SkyClan blood, but from May too.

A wistful look clouded Paledusk's eyes for a heartbeat.

"Slatewhisker would later tell me that May should've been born a SkyClan cat," he muttered, as if echoing her thoughts. "She was suited for it."

Frostmask was pulled in by Paledusk's brooding, and her mind drifted to how different her life would have been if May had actually been born in SkyClan. Would she have grown up respect by the clan for being the kit of the deputy, rather than looked down upon as the kit of a rogue? Would Larchtail and Mottledflame have been her closest friends rather than Autumnleap, Pineshade, and Poolcloud? ...But, it'd be terrible to leave Autumnleap and her

friends behind.

Although, I suppose, if I'd been born in SkyClan, I wouldn't have known what I was missing.

"Anyway though," Paledusk said, refocusing her attention. "That's the end of that story. When they reached the edge of the two-leg place, they parted, and Slatewhisker returned back to camp, and May to the two-leg place."

Frostmask blinked, disappointment stirring in her belly that the tale was already over.

"If they parted so quickly, how did they get to become friends?" Frostmask asked, her mew edged with hope that she'd get at least a few more pieces of information from Paledusk tonight.

Paledusk's whiskers twitched with faint amusement, and Frostmask got the sense that he knew exactly what she wanted.

"Well that wasn't the only time Slatewhisker went into the two-leg place. He and May ended up running into each other a few more times. But, that's a story for another night," Paledusk meowed before casting a pointed glance up towards the sky.

Frostmask followed his gaze, peering up between the branches above her head, and she sighed as she saw the night was wearing on. She would have to leave soon to be back in camp before dawn. Ducking her head low, she crawled her way out of the bush and turned to gaze back at Paledusk.

"Okay," she conceded. "But, next time I want to hear that story, in addition to the one about why Slatewhisker changed his mind on the rogues. Oh, and how you and May met, and also what happened to that group of rogues in the end..."

Even as Frostmask rattled off her list, she knew that they realistically wouldn't have the time to talk about all of those things in just one meeting, and she expected Paledusk to say so. But, as Paledusk slipped from the bush as well, carefully weaving around the thorny holly leaves as to not snag his pelt, he didn't point out

the obvious impossibility of her requests. Instead, he just bowed his head in a flourish of exaggerated obedience.

"As you wish. I shall begin practicing my orating at once," he said with the upmost solemnity, before glancing back up at her to reveal humor shining in his eyes.

Frostmask purred, her tail curling with amusement.

"Good," she said, responding to his show with a tone equally as serious. "Should we meet here again in a moon?"

Paledusk straightened but dipped his head slightly to her in his much more typical, regal manner.

"Sounds perfect," he purred. "Take care, Frostmask."

Frostmask nodded back at him.

"You too," she said, surprising herself with the bit of warmth that kindled in her chest.

Her meetings with Paledusk had started with the strictly utilitarian goal of gaining knowledge about her mother and her past, but at some point, she must have actually started to care for him. Although it was a bit tricky to pin down when or how that could have happened, given their complicated history...

Frostmask's twitched her ears, trying to sort out her sudden influx of contradictory feelings without letting the emotions show in her face. Paledusk hadn't yet turned away, and she wasn't sure if she was ready to share this revelation with him.

But, Paledusk was just too good at reading others. Paledusk's green eyes brightened as his attention sharpened towards her. Frostmask clenched her jaw, biting back a curse at her bad luck while he studied her, some bemusement creeping into his expression.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Uh. No, er..." Frostmask said, shifting from paw to paw uncomfortably beneath his inquisitive eyes. "It's just... It was good

to see you."

Paledusk's curious gaze flitted over her for another heartbeat, as if he sensed her holding back, but then he just gave her one final blink before angling himself back towards SkyClan territory and bounding up the slope, away from Fourtrees.

Frostmask sighed softly, her shoulders loosening. Even though she had enjoyed their conversation, it was still a relief to be freed from his scrutiny. As Paledusk trotted off, Frostmask twisted her head to rasp her tongue through her fur absentmindedly, instead focusing on turning thoughts of Paledusk over and over in her head, searching them for insight.

It still felt wrong to think of Paledusk as "a father," that at least she was sure of. But, perhaps she could finally reach an answer for his proposal for them to at least be allies... or maybe even friends.

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake, pulling her thoughts back to her body. She carefully groomed any trace of SkyClan scent from her pelt, waiting until Paledusk's white pelt was finally, completely swallowed by the darkness before she turned and faded into the shadows herself.

I will always walk beside you

The night sky was utterly cloud-covered, making the murky shadows in the camp near oppressive. Still though, Frostmask could make out the silhouettes of Cricketpaw and Hollowpaw as they stood before Sedgestar at the foot of Clanrock, and the proud gleam in Pineshade's eye as she gazed at her apprentice.

"Cricketpaw, Hollowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend ShadowClan, even at the cost of your lives?" Sedgestar's solemn meow echoed through the clearing.

"I do," Cricketpaw and Hollowpaw's voices rang in unison.

Sedgestar nodded, accepting their vows.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, give you your warrior names. Cricketpaw, from this moment you will be known as Cricketsong. StarClan honors your bravery and your honesty. And, Hollowpaw, you will be known as Hollowshade. StarClan honors your patience and cleverness." Sedgestar's muzzle brushed Cricketsong's forehead first before he moved to Hollowshade's. "And, we welcome you as full warriors of ShadowClan."

"Cricketsong!" Pineshade yowled out before anyone else.

"Cricketsong! Hollowshade!" the rest of Clan took up the chant.

Cricketsong raised her chin, her grey and pale ginger coat ruffling with pride. Hollowshade seemed a bit more composed, her darker pelt sleek and her expression taciturn, but she still affectionately pressed her side to her sister's.

Frostmask purred, watching as Pineshade was among the first to walk over and congratulate the new warriors. But, her attention was pulled off of them and to Sedgestar as he stuck his head into the medicine cat's den for a moment before retreating into his own den at the roots of the Oak Tree.

A pin-prick of unease twinged in Frostmask's chest. It wasn't like Sedgestar to vanish so quickly after a ceremony, but Sedgestar had been withdrawn for the past few days— not even calling on Frostmask for their 'leadership lessons.'

But, Grovepelt had recently fallen sick to another infection, and that was likely contributing to Sedgestar's dark mood. Frostmask tried to not hold it against their leader. Everyone in ShadowClan knew how close he and Grovepelt were; of course he'd be worried about him.

Frostmask shook her ears, focusing back on the newly named warriors. In addition to Pineshade, Hollowshade's former mentor Rowanheart had gone over to congratulate them too, and Dustleap, of course. He wove around his daughters, his tail held high in a rare display of unstrained joy.

Lizardstrike, Featherfall, and Yewstorm also trotted over to speak to their old friends, but Frostmask noticed Cedarfur hanging back a bit. He was hovering awkwardly a couple fox-lengths away rather than going over to brush cheeks or touch noses with his sisters, and Cricketsong and Hollowshade seemed to respond in kind. Even as the two new warriors basked in their loved ones' praise, Hollowshade shot Cedarfur a quick, cold look, while Cricketsong seemed to be deliberately avoiding her brother's gaze.

Frostmask's brow furrowed in concern. From her perspective at least, the three litter-mates had always appeared close— bonded by the losses of their mother and their brother so early in their apprenticeship. So why were they acting so hostile towards each other now?

Did Cedarfur becoming a warrior earlier than his littermates drive a wedge between them?

Frostmask blinked thoughtfully, putting herself in the young cats' positions.

It's not like Cricketsong and Hollowshade had to wait too long to join him. But, maybe it's the principle of the thing. Like, he could have stayed an apprentice for a few extra days, but instead he had to make a point in becoming a warrior before them, as if to prove that he was better than

them in some way.

Frostmask sighed softly to herself, giving her head a small shake.

But, they probably don't know that it was really Dampfang who was pushing for the earlier ceremony, not necessarily Cedarfur. And, then Sedgestar just eventually gave into him.

Really those three littermates were just dragged into this. Making Hollowshade and Cricketsong upset was just the price of making Dampfang happy— reasonable collateral in Sedgestar's and Dampfang's eyes.

Frostmask's tail flipped against the ground, and her eyes tracked through the crowd, looking for Dampfang. She found him at the edge of the camp, picking at his claws with an expression of boredom plastered on his face. Frostmask's jaw tightened in anger.

*Of course he doesn't care about their ceremony, since **his** apprentice is already a warrior.*

Cricketsong having been Pineshade's apprentice apparently wasn't even enough to make Dampfang pay attention. Although, to be fair, Frostmask wasn't entirely sure if Dampfang and Pineshade were even still together at this point. Pineshade hadn't spoken to her about anything directly, but at least as far as Frostmask could tell, the two of them had started avoiding each other so thoroughly, an onlooker could reasonably assume that one of them must have fleas or mange.

Frostmask sighed again, a faint headache starting to form behind her eyes. It was growing late in the night, and she was running on a deficit of sleep thanks to her meeting with Paledusk from a few nights ago. She'd much rather be curled up in her den, catching up on some rest before dawn, than pondering the inner workings of her clan-mates' minds. But, if Sedgestar— and weirdly enough, Dampfang— had taught her anything, understanding her clan-mates' emotions and motivations were a vital part of leadership.

Still though, there would be plenty of time for musing in the morning.

Frostmask rose to her paws, stretching the kinks from her legs. The meeting was dispersing, but Frostmask padded up to Cricketsong and Hollowshade before they could head off too. After all, Grovepelt had always made a point to congratulate the newly named warriors after their ceremonies. It seemed wrong for her to not continue the tradition.

Pineshade was still with Hollowshade and Cricketsong, but she was now chatting with Rowanheart. Cedarfur seemed like he still hadn't made up his mind about whether it would be a good idea to congratulate his littermates or not, and so he continued to linger a few tail-lengths away— close, but not close enough to actually talk to them. Meanwhile though, Lizardstrike had stopped near Cedarfur to speak to him. Cedarfur was watching Lizardstrike as he paw-signed, but his ears stayed angled towards his sisters.

Both Hollowshade and Cricketsong dipped their heads to Frostmask respectfully as she approached, and Frostmask had to resist the urge to self-consciously rasp her tongue through her pelt as faint embarrassment prickled at her. Even though Frostmask had been deputy for about a moon by now, she still wasn't used to such displays of respect from other warriors.

At least it was a bit less strange since Hollowshade and Cricketsong were younger than her. The first time Weaseltail had dipped his head to her when she's asked him if he would take a patrol down the ThunderClan border had *really* thrown her for a loop.

"Ah our generous deputy has decided to grace us with her presence tonight," Pineshade's teasing voice broke in, pulling her from her thoughts. "To what do we owe the honor?"

Frostmask narrowed her eyes at Pineshade, hoping to convey a silent reprimand for her sarcasm. With Dampfang still being such a nuisance by challenging Frostmask's authority in the Clan, the last thing she needed was Pineshade also inadvertently teaching ShadowClan's youngest warriors that Frostmask wasn't a 'real' deputy.

But, Pineshade just responded to Frostmask's glare with a slow, deliberate yawn, and Frostmask found herself stifling a laugh

despite herself.

At least I know that even if I do get used to the respectful displays, it will never truly go to my head since I'll always have Pineshade here to keep me humble.

"I just wanted to congratulate you both," Frostmask purred, turning her attention to Hollowshade and Cricketsong. "You've done so well, and ShadowClan is lucky to have you both as warriors."

"Thank you, Frostmask," Cricketsong said, dipping her head again.

But, Hollowshade sent a sideways glance over at Cedarfur for a moment before turning her eyes back on Frostmask again.

"Yes, thank you," she meowed. "I'm glad we've done well. Although it does seem like that *some* warriors have done better than us."

Frostmask blinked in surprise. Hollowshade's tone was even, but there was a challenge in her eyes as she met her gaze to Frostmask's.

"Hollowshade," Cricketsong hissed scoldingly under her breath.

"It's okay," Frostmask said quickly, glancing at Cricketsong, whose ears were flicking nervously, before turning her attention back onto Hollowshade. "I hope you know that Cedarfur becoming a warrior a bit earlier had nothing to do with any lack in your abilities."

Out of the corner of her gaze, Frostmask thought she saw Cedarfur's ears twitching towards her, but she tried to keep her attention on the newly named warriors, waiting to see how they would respond. But, Hollowshade's only indication that she'd even heard her was a slight narrowing of her eyes.

Frostmask hesitated. She wanted to shift the blame, to say that the decision had been out of her paws, that Dampfang had been the one who wanted it, and Sedgestar who'd eventually agreed. As much as she'd be happy to point the fault at Dampfang, she couldn't do that without also making Sedgestar seem like he'd passively folded to his demands or, instead, that Sedgestar had simply been uncaring towards Cricketsong's and Hollowshade's feelings on the matter. It

didn't seem wise to spread either of those impressions.

Although it's not like Sedgestar is making this better for himself in Cricketsong's and Hollowshade's eyes by disappearing right after their ceremony...

Frostmask cleared her throat.

"Anyway," she meowed. "Once everyone else has gone to their nests for the night, don't forgot that you have your vigil to hold until sunrise. Keep a sharp eye out; remember there's been fox scent around the forest these past couple days."

"It won't get past us," Cricketsong assured, and Hollowshade murmured an agreement.

Frostmask left them with a nod. She wasn't actually all that concerned about the fox— its scent trails had mostly kept away from camp, closer to the ThunderClan border— but it couldn't hurt to make the young warriors feel like they were doing something worthwhile.

The camp had already emptied significantly as most cats slipped into the dens. Frostmask padded towards the warriors' den herself, sticking her head inside to evaluate where the two new warriors should sleep.

The den was actually formed by three different bramble bushes; their branches tangled together in the middle, creating a thickly woven net for the roof. The resulting cavern was large, but it was beginning to get a bit crowded as ShadowClan's warrior population grew. Frostmask made a mental note to ask a few cats tomorrow to prune some of the inside branches to open the den up more. But, there should still be room for two more nests for Hollowshade and Cricketsong, if they squeezed a bit near the entrance of the den.

Frostmask withdrew back out of the den, deciding that she would have the nests made up for Hollowshade and Cricketsong now, so they wouldn't have to do it themselves in the morning. Perhaps that would be enough of a peace offering that they would forgive her for allowing Cedarfur to become a warrior before them.

Frostmask turned towards the holly bush, intending to have one of the apprentices take care of it, but she hadn't even completed a full step towards the apprentices' den before she paused, hit by the obvious.

Now that Hollowshade and Cricketsong were warriors, for the first time in Frostmask's life, ShadowClan *didn't* have any apprentices. Amberberry's litter would be the next in line, but it would be a bit over two moons before they reached the proper age for it.

Frostmask shook her head. There went her plan of asking some apprentice to take care of the nests so she could go sleep herself.

Frostmask glanced over her shoulder at the warriors' den, debating whether she should just head to her nest and leave Cricketsong and Hollowshade to fend for themselves. As Frostmask looked back, her gaze caught Autumnleap's, who had been lingering out in the camp. He padded over to her, purring in greeting as he draped his fluffy auburn tail over her back.

"You coming to sleep?" he asked, his jaws parting in a yawn as he spoke.

"In a moment," Frostmask said, making up her mind. "I'm going to make some nests for Hollowshade and Cricketsong first."

Autumnleap's ears pricked in surprise.

"Are you sure that's a job for a deputy?" he teased gently. "I'm sure you could order someone else to do it."

Frostmask blinked at him with mock innocence.

"Are you volunteering?" she asked sweetly.

"Er..." Autumnleap stalled, his eyes darting from side to side as if searching for an excuse somewhere in front of him.

Frostmask huffed, rolling her eyes, but she gave Autumnleap a fond nudge on his shoulder with her muzzle.

"That's what I thought," she said. "Besides, I'm not sure if it would

make certain warriors happy for me to order them to do it."

Autumnleap scoffed, knowing exactly who she was referring to.

"Yeah, but on the other paw, I doubt those '*certain warriors'* will find it a good look for the deputy to be doing an apprentice chore," Autumnleap pointed out, arching a brow.

Frostmask's ears flicked in slight exasperation.

"Well I was going to ask an apprentice to do it, *but...."*

Autumnleap blinked as he caught on, his brow furrowing.

"Oh yeah... huh. That is weird. How are nests supposed to get made without any apprentices in camp?" he mused.

"Well, you and the rest of the warriors have got paws, haven't you?" Frostmask asked. "Warriors already typically keep their own nests fresh, I'm sure they'll remember how to change the queens' and elders' bedding too."

Autumnleap sighed dramatically, his tail falling off her back to swish slowly behind him.

"Yeah, but one of the perks of being a warrior is that you don't have to do that anymore," he complained. "Can't Cricketsong and Hollowshade keep doing it?"

Frostmask's pelt prickled. That would surely not endear the two sisters to her.

"That's not fair to them," Frostmask pointed out. "I don't really see another option besides having all of the warriors chip in... But, I'll ask Grovepelt what he thinks. This sort of situation must have happened to ShadowClan before. He'll know what to do."

Autumnleap nodded, visibly relaxing at the thought of leaving the issue in Grovepelt's experienced paws.

"Good idea," he agreed.

Frostmask touched her muzzle to Autumnleap's cheek.

"I'll be in the nest soon," she promised. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Autumnleap purred, rubbing his face to hers for a moment before turning to head to the den.

Frostmask turned as well, but she padded towards the medicine cats' den. Elmclaw kept a stash of moss there— she could borrow from it to make the new nest, and also being in the medicine cat's den would also allow her to speak with Grovepelt.

Frostmask's stomach lurched as her thoughts turned to the former deputy.

His shoulder wounds still stubbornly refused to fully seal, and because of his already weakened state, this new infection had sunk its claws in deeply and begun to ravage his body.

At least he had Elmclaw to care for him. Frostmask knew that the medicine cat would do everything he could for Grovepelt. But, even Elmclaw's diligent care alone wouldn't be enough to drive off the infection, if Grovepelt himself no longer had the strength left to fight back.

Frostmask braced herself for a heartbeat when she reached the foot of Clanrock. Then she stuck her head through the lichen curtain that covered the mouth of the medicine cat's den. Immediately, a strong, sickly-sweet scent of infection hit her, and she had to swallow down a wave of bile that rose in the back of her throat. She waited a moment, until she could tolerate the smell and the darkness of the den.

"Elmclaw?" she called softly.

A large lump in the back of the den quickly stirred and rose to his paws. Frostmask's gaze drifted from him to the frail form of Grovepelt, who was curled up and sleeping in a nest closer to the entrance. Even concealed by shadows, Frostmask could see the shape of his skeleton beneath his thin coat. Swallowing nervously, Frostmask managed to tear her gaze off of Grovepelt and back to

Elmclaw as he reached her.

Frostmask's paws prickled as she took in Elmclaw's face. He looked downright haggard— his green eyes dull and the state of his dark tabby fur one step away from degenerating from simply untidy to matted.

"Are you okay?" Frostmask asked him anxiously, for a moment, completely forgetting what had brought her here in the first place.

Elmclaw blinked at her once, his brow furrowing in confusion as if he could not comprehend why she would ask him a question with such an obvious answer.

"What can I do for you, Frostmask?" Elmclaw said instead of responding.

"Well, I came to ask if I could have some moss for Cricketsong's and Hollowshade's new nests..." Frostmask said. "But, now I feel like I should be asking what I can do for *you."*

While she'd been speaking, Elmclaw was already moving, gathering up a large bundle of moss from the area near his herb stores and carrying it over to her.

"Here," he said, dropping it at her paws. "Just have someone gather more to replace it tomorrow."

"Thank you," Frostmask said, still blinking at Elmclaw with concern. "...Is it Grovepelt?"

Elmclaw sighed, his shoulders hunching. He was silent for several heartbeats, making Frostmask wonder if he would refuse to answer her questions all together.

"...Let's go outside," Elmclaw spoke finally. "I don't want to wake him."

Elmclaw brushed past her and padded out of the cave. Frostmask grabbed the moss and cast a quick final glance at Grovepelt before following Elmclaw out of the den.

There weren't many cats left in the clearing, so Elmclaw's large form crouched in a secluded corner of the camp was easy to spot. Frostmask padded over to him, putting the moss down on the ground before taking a seat at his side. Elmclaw didn't speak for a few moments, and neither did Frostmask. She just waited for him.

"He took a turn for the worst tonight," Elmclaw muttered. "He's not getting better."

Frostmask's blood chilled. Anxious energy slithered through her, twisting her stomach into knots and sending her claws flexing in and out.

"...Grovepelt?" she croaked, even though she knew Elmclaw couldn't be talking about anyone else.

Elmclaw gave a sharp nod, his green eyes glittering with anguish.

"I've been trying everything, but I can't..." Elmclaw inhaled deeply, closing his eyes for a moment.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as she noticed his paws trembling.

"Elmclaw, you're shaking," she murmured, gently touching a paw to his.

His eyes opened again.

"I'm sorry," he said, curling his tail around his paws as if to hide them from her. "I'm just feeling a bit lightheaded."

"Have you eaten today?" she asked, searching his face. "When was the last time you've slept?"

Elmclaw's eyes flared suddenly.

"How can I rest when Grovepelt is like this?" he hissed, his teeth baring.

Frostmask's ears went flat against her head, and she drew back from him slightly. She didn't think she'd ever had Elmclaw get angry with her before. Elmclaw blinked and seemed to realize he'd overreacted,

because he sighed, rubbing a paw against his weary face.

"I'm sorry," he muttered again.

"You need help, and you need to rest or you're going to make yourself sick too," Frostmask said, lifting her chin and doing her best to summon an *I'm-the-deputy* air of authority. "Should we ask Clearstream for help?"

Elmclaw shook his head.

"No," he said. "There's nothing that she can do that I haven't already tried."

"She can at least watch Grovepelt while you sleep," Frostmask pointed out.

Elmclaw's lip twitched, and he shook his head again, more firmly this time.

"She retired for a reason," he growled. "It wasn't so that I could go crying to her anytime I'm slightly overwhelmed."

"Clearstream would *want* to help," Frostmask insisted.

Elmclaw was silent, his ears flat against his head and his jaw clenched.

Frostmask sighed softly.

"Look, I get it," she said, her tone turning gentle. "You want to make sure the Clan knows that you're a good medicine cat, and you, by yourself, can take care of us. Ever since I became deputy, I felt the exact same way, knowing that cats would have preferred me to be Grovepelt..."

Frostmask's voice trailed off, and she coughed awkwardly. Truth be told, she would be happy to give her power back to Grovepelt, if he was fit for it. But, if Grovepelt really was as direly ill as Elmclaw said, then soon he may be gone entirely.

Frostmask's head spun.

Oh stars, what will I do then?

"But, I don't feel any shame to come to Grovepelt for advice," Frostmask said, forcing herself to continue. "And, I don't think there's any shame for you to go to Clearstream either. That doesn't make you any less of a good medicine cat."

Elmclaw was still quiet for a few more moments before he bowed his head, digging his claws into the ground.

"I just feel like such a failure," he growled in a voice so low and quiet, Frostmask had to strain her ears to hear. "What will the Clan think of me? What will Sedgestar think of me? He and Grovepelt are so close... I haven't been able to tell Sedgestar yet that I couldn't save him. He'll be so devastated..."

"Well... there's no need to talk like that," Frostmask said, her brow furrowed. "Grovepelt isn't gone yet."

Elmclaw's head bowed even further so that his chin touched his chest.

"He will be soon," he whispered, staring down at his paws.

A heavy stone of weight fell down into Frostmask's stomach, and the low level of anxiety thrumming in the back of her skull started to sharpen towards something closer to panic.

"Let's go get Clearstream," she declared, getting to her paws, the new nests for Cricketsong and Hollowshade forgotten. *"Now.* This isn't an insult towards your abilities. But, if we want to save Grovepelt, we should try every option we've got."

Elmclaw blinked, turning his eyes towards her, and although his gaze was still dull, he rose to his feet too.

"You're right," he muttered, already starting to stride towards the elders' den. "Come on."

They hurried towards the old pine tree stump, Elmclaw sticking his head inside and calling for Clearstream. The former medicine cat's long grey fur was messy with sleep as she emerged from the den,

blinking drowsiness from her eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, taking in their anxious expressions.

"Grovepelt's infection is getting worse," Elmclaw sighed, the fur down his spine bristling. "I've been trying everything I can think of, but nothing is working. I'm afraid we will lose him if we can't reduce his fever soon."

Clearstream's gaze sharpened, and seasons suddenly seemed to fall off of her as she no longer looked like an elder, but a medicine cat determined to save her clan-mates.

"Show him to me," she said.

Elmclaw turned, striding towards the Clanrock with Clearstream at his side. He muttered terms and treatments he'd tried to her, most of which completely went over Frostmask's head. But, as Frostmask watched Elmclaw and Clearstream together, she was reminded why the older cat retired— Clearstream moved stiffly, limping along as if her joints were bothering her as she struggled to keep up with Elmclaw's long stride, and Frostmask felt a bit bad for pulling the elder out of her nest. But, it would all be worth it if they could save Grovepelt, right?

Frostmask trailed after them as they entered back into the medicine cat's den. The situation now felt very out of her paws; she had no training in healing, and if she remained in the den to watch them work, she'd likely just end up in their way. Still, her anxiety about Grovepelt kept her lingering at the mouth of the cave as Elmclaw and Clearstream made a beeline for the herb stores, getting to work shifting through leaves and roots out while murmuring to each other in low voices the whole while.

Frostmask had intended to stay near the entrance and out of their way, but she found her paws leading her towards Grovepelt, who was still sleeping curled up in his nest. Soon she was standing over him, sweeping a worried gaze over his feeble body and trying not to breathe in too deeply, so the nauseating scent of infection wouldn't stick in the back of her throat.

As Frostmask gazed at Grovepelt, fear rose up inside of her like a flood as the severity of the situation finally fully hit her.

He looked like he'd been wasting away, as if this infection had sapped the flesh from his bones. And a scent crept into Frostmask's nose— something deeper than the floral scents of herbs, or even the sickly-sweet scent of infection. It was faint, but sharp and bitter... and something she'd smelled before. The scent and Grovepelt's carefully curled up, emaciated form stirred a memory from deep in Frostmask mind.

This is just how May was like, right before she died...

It's the smell of death.

Dread and dismay rooted Frostmask's paws to the ground, but she gave her head a sharp shake, trying to push the thoughts away.

No! Grovepelt can't actually be dying. Not yet. Elmclaw and Clearstream can still save him!

But, she couldn't ignore the truth of what she saw and smelled. As she stood there, denial and grief battling together in her chest, Grovepelt's eyelids twitched, then flickered open. His eyes were bleary for a moment, but some of their cloudiness faded as he recognized her.

"Frostmask," Grovepelt purred in a voice barely louder than a breath. "Have you come to visit?"

Frostmask sunk down to the ground next to him, curling her plumy tail around his side. Despite the warm green-leaf air and the heat radiating off his short pelt from his fever, he was shivering.

"Yes," Frostmask said, forcing a purr into her throat. "I wanted to see how you're doing, and tell you that Clearstream has come over to help too. She and Elmclaw will get you out of the medicine cat's den in no time."

Grovepelt's eyes grew half-lidded, and he was silent for a few heartbeats, long enough that Frostmask began to wonder if he'd drifted back off to sleep. But, then he spoke softly.

"You don't have to lie for my sake, little one. I've lived long enough to know a dying cat when I see one."

Frostmask made a soft noise of protest as indignation rose in her, only to be strangled in her throat before she could form the feeling into words.

Grovepelt blinked at her slowly. His eyes were cloudy with exhaustion and overlaid with a sheen brought on by fever, but beneath it all, they were still intelligent and focused. He truly understood what was happening to him, and Frostmask wasn't sure if that made it worse or better.

"Do not worry," Grovepelt muttered. "I am not afraid."

He managed to turn enough to press his muzzle to the side of one of her fore-legs.

"...I am leaving the clan in good paws," he whispered, a spark of fondness twinkling in his eyes.

Frostmask blinked hard, glancing away from him to stare fiercely at the stone wall of the den.

Grovepelt was the one dying, and yet still he was the one comforting *her?* Grovepelt had it all backwards— if anything that showed just how horribly unequipped she was to be deputy.

"...I'm still not ready," Frostmask whispered back, managing to glance down at Grovepelt from the corner of her eyes.

Despite her protests, Grovepelt's fond look didn't fade.

"Let me tell you a secret, little one," Grovepelt murmured. "No one is ever ready for anything. You must just take what life gives you. And, try to be enough."

Frostmask swallowed hard around the lump that was rapidly forming in the back of her throat.

At that moment, Clearstream and Elmclaw came padding over. Frostmask glanced over at them, hope sparking in her chest that

they had brought over the miracle poultice which would cure Grovepelt. But, the leaf wrap in Elmclaw's jaws was disappointedly small, and when he placed in on the ground in front of Grovepelt's muzzle and the leaves fell open, Frostmask saw that there was only a sole poppy seed inside.

"What's this?" Frostmask asked, glancing from Elmclaw to Clearstream and back again. "Poppy seeds are just for easing pain, right? I thought you were going to lower his fever."

Clearstream gave her head a sad shake.

"Elmclaw has already done everything in a medicine cat's power to help," she said softly. "The best we can do now is make Grovepelt comfortable until his body fights off the infection, or until..."

"...It's time for me to join StarClan," Grovepelt rasped, finishing her sentence for her when Clearstream's voice trailed off.

Clearstream's blue eyes swam with sorrow as she dipped her head to press her nose to Grovepelt's.

"I'm sorry that I cannot do more, old friend," she whispered.

"It's alright," Grovepelt reassured her as he obediently lapped up the one seed.

"Let me or Elmclaw know if you need additional seeds," Clearstream said, lifting her head again and reverting to her medicine cat briskness. "But, know that anymore will make you drowsy. That may prevent..."

Clearstream's voice wavered as her brusque facade cracked for a moment.

"...It may prevent you from saying your goodbyes," she managed to finish.

Grovepelt nodded in understanding.

"Just one is fine for now," he murmured. "Thank you."

As if this short interaction had exhausted him, Grovepelt's eyes went half-lidded again, and he became still and quiet. Frostmask shot a fearful glance over at his flank and sighed in relief as she saw it still rose and fell with breath. She scrambled to her paws, sudden urgency clawing at her.

"I—I'm—" Frostmask stammered. "I'm going to get Sedgestar."

"I think that is wise," Clearstream murmured, gently cushioning more moss around Grovepelt's bony sides.

Frostmask nodded vigorously, turning and hurrying from the den as her mind whirled. Besides Sedgestar, who were the cats that she should notify? Of course, Grovepelt was loved by the whole clan, but if only a few cats had the time to say goodbye, she should pick carefully. Sedgestar and Clearstream were two very close companions of Grovepelt, but who else?

Pineshade. Of course.

Frostmask altered course, scurrying across camp with short, hurried steps and slipping into the warriors' den. Most cats beneath the bramble bush were sleeping peacefully by now. Only a few were drowsily sharing tongues in the back or murmuring to each other in low tones. But, Frostmask ignored them, instead focusing on locating Pineshade's dark pelt.

Squeezing around sleeping bodies and dodging paws and tails, Frostmask made it to Pineshade's side, where she woke her with a gentle touch on the shoulder. When Pineshade's amber eye flickered open, annoyance at being woken sparked in her gaze, but it lasted only for an instant before it was replaced by concern as she took in Frostmask's grave face.

"It's Grovepelt," Frostmask breathed. "He is... I think you need to come see him."

Pineshade's expression rapidly darkened as she caught her meaning. She rose to her paws without a word and strode off, heading straight for the medicine cat's den. Frostmask followed her out of the den, but then turned towards the Oak Tree. Nervousness swirled

in her belly at the thought of delivering the bad news to Sedgestar, but it didn't slow her steps as she reached the earthen tunnel at the roots.

"Sedgestar?" she called softly into the den. "Sedgestar, it's urgent."

Only a heartbeat later, Sedgestar's brown striped head emerged from the dim tunnel, his eyes darting from side to side as if he expected to see enemies swarming in through the thorny walls. Frostmask took a quick step back from the entrance, narrowly avoiding him bowling her over as he rushed from the den. There, Sedgestar finished his scan of the camp, as if finally satisfied that ShadowClan was not in immediate mortal peril, before he turned his gaze onto Frostmask.

"What is it?" he asked briskly.

From over his shoulder, Frostmask could spot Emberflower peering at her from the entrance of the tunnel, her green eyes curious.

"G—Grovepelt has gotten very sick," Frostmask stammered, somehow feeling very much like a young apprentice wilting under her leader's scrutiny as she explained a mistake she made, even though logically, of course, she knew Grovepelt's illness was in no way her fault. "I think you should be with him."

Sedgestar's ears flattened against his head as his brow furrowed.

"Sick? How sick?" he demanded.

"Very. I think," Frostmask said, her ears twisting back as well. "Elmclaw said he took a sudden turn earlier."

Sedgestar's eyes widened, and something like panic flashed in them for a moment before he whirled on his heel and sprinted towards the medicine cat's den.

"Oh no." Emberflower's eyes were eyes round with concern as she padded out of the tunnel. "...Sedgestar will not take this well," she added in a murmur, seemingly half to herself.

Frostmask glanced over at the older warrior, hoping for guidance.

"I tried to help," she said, a touch desperately. "I got Clearstream to see if she could help Elmclaw, but she says there's nothing to be done. But, she's been with Grovepelt, and I woke Pineshade... Is there anyone else? Clearstream said that we... we should be prepared to say goodbye."

"No. You've done well," Emberflower purred reassuringly, brushing her muzzle against Frostmask's head, and Frostmask relaxed for a heartbeat. "We should go to them too."

Frostmask nodded, and she shadowed Emberflower to the den.

As they followed Sedgestar inside, Frostmask was surprised to see him hanging back in the cave, but then she realized that was because Pineshade was still speaking with Grovepelt. She stood over Grovepelt's nest, her eye shut and head bent down so her forehead pressed to Grovepelt's. Grovepelt murmured something to her too low for Frostmask to understand, but Pineshade nodded sightly, her forehead still touching Grovepelt's. She then pulled her head back and straightened, her eye opening so she could gaze down at him.

"You've got a good heart, Pineshade. Never forget that," Grovepelt rasped, his voice thin but now clear enough to reach Frostmask's ears.

Pineshade whispered something to him too quiet for Frostmask to catch, then turned, padding towards the cave's exit. As she went to brush past Frostmask, Frostmask flicked her tail out, touching it to Pineshade's side to stop her.

"I don't think you have to leave," Frostmask whispered.

Pineshade gazed straight ahead, not meeting her eye.

"I can't... I don't want to be here when it happens," she whispered in a hoarse voice, an edge of shame in her words.

Frostmask's heart twisted for her friend. Although Grovepelt had been a valuable source of support and advice for Frostmask, as he'd been for many of her clan-mates, he was so much more for Pineshade. Frostmask knew without a doubt that he'd played an

indispensable role in shaping Pineshade from an unruly and temperamental apprentice, to the much more patient and thoughtful warrior she was today. Frostmask pressed her muzzle into Pineshade's dark-furred shoulder reassuringly.

"Do what makes you comfortable," she whispered to Pineshade. "Whatever you do, Grovepelt knows how much you care about him."

Pineshade nodded hard, her shoulders hunching, and then she walked out of the den. Frostmask turned back towards Grovepelt to see that Sedgestar had taken Pineshade's place at Grovepelt's head. Sedgestar was gazing down at Grovepelt with an unreadable look on his face.

"I'm glad you're here," Grovepelt rasped, stirring slightly.

"Grovepelt..." Sedgestar began in a low voice.

Grovepelt lifted a trembling paw and placed it on Sedgestar's, silencing him.

"Allow me to speak. I don't know how much time I have left," Grovepelt whispered. "I've had a long life. A good life. And, you've been such an important part of that. I am so proud of you, Sedgestar. I couldn't be more honored to call you my son, even if we shared blood. You have accomplished so much for ShadowClan, and I know you will do so much more even after I'm gone."

Sedgestar's shoulders stiffened, and he ducked his head.

"But, I can't do this without you," Sedgestar rasped, his voice very young and vulnerable for a moment.

Frostmask blinked, silently stunned at the admission from Sedgestar; it hardly sounded like the leader she thought she knew. Sedgestar had many facets, but she'd never seen him appear so... weak.

Immediately, Frostmask's ear-tips burnt with shame at that thought.

She shouldn't be so callous towards her leader. Although Sedgestar

could be ruthless, ultimately, he was a cat too, like any other, who cared deeply for the ones he loved.

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake, mentally scolding herself.

He has every right to be upset.

"You can," Grovepelt responded to Sedgestar, surprisingly firm despite his frail state. "You're not the same young leader you once were. You haven't needed me for a long time. Much longer than you realize."

Sedgestar pressed his forehead to Grovepelt's, screwing his eyes shut.

"I've always needed you, Grovepelt," he rasped. "Please don't die."

Grovepelt didn't respond, only sighing softly. Sedgestar's eyes opened, and he stepped closer to him and lowered himself to the ground. Then as delicately as a mother wrapping herself around her newborns, Sedgestar curled himself around Grovepelt and rested his chin on his shoulder. Even though Sedgestar was not a massive cat, Grovepelt's body had wasted so much, he looked as small and fragile as a baby bird cradled next to him. Sedgestar bent his head to press his nose into Grovepelt's fur, and Grovepelt's flanks shivered under his muzzle as his body struggled to inhale breath.

"My son... Sedgestar..." Grovepelt whispered, his voice fading as his eyelids drooped closed. "Don't be frightened. Even when you can't see me, I will always walk beside you..."

Sedgestar closed his eyes as well, simply holding Grovepelt. And, he continued to hold him, even long after Grovepelt's flanks had stilled.

Frostmask bowed her head, a great wave of grief crashing in her chest. Clearstream stepped towards Grovepelt, placing an ear on his chest before shaking her head to confirm what everyone in the den already knew.

"Goodbye old friend," Clearstream whispered as she pressed her muzzle to Grovepelt's forehead. "May StarClan light your path."

Frostmask lifted her gaze, waiting to see if Sedgestar would arise and go announce Grovepelt's passing to the Clan. But, Sedgestar didn't move from next to Grovepelt, or even open his eyes; not even when Emberflower padded to his side and supportively laid her tail over his back. Elmclaw walked over to Frostmask, his steps slow and his gaze hollow with defeat.

"You should call the clan," he whispered to her.

Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise. For a moment, she wanted to protest, but the urge died as she again caught a glimpse of Sedgestar's grieving state.

Elmclaw is right. We shouldn't disturb him.

Frostmask took a deep breath, summoning her strength. She nodded to Elmclaw and turned to pad out of the den, her paws dragging with grief and reluctance to tell all of ShadowClan the terrible news. Elmclaw followed her out, and when she emerged from the cave, she saw that a few cats were now out in camp. Pineshade was still there, and it looked like she'd awoken some others—Autumnleap, Poolcloud, Murmurstep, Rowanheart, Snakeeyes, Redclaw, and Weaseltail were also sitting near her, and gazing at Frostmask solemnly. Frostmask knew that Pineshade would have probably gotten Dewleaf too, if she wasn't with her kits. Regardless though, everyone would know soon enough.

"Wake everyone," Frostmask rasped. "We have an announcement to make."

Most of them sprung to their paws, quick to obey, except for Pineshade. Instead, her expression crumpled with grief, and she bowed her head, her pelt spiking, and her claws unsheathing to dig into the ground. Murmurstep gently rasped her tongue over one of Pineshade's ears in a comforting gesture before padding towards the nursery to alert the cats there, and Poolcloud followed her. Redclaw took Murmurstep's place by Pineshade, supportively pressing her pelt against her daughter's side and remaining next to her. Weaseltail, Snakeeyes, and Rowanheart split the warriors' den and the elders' between them, calling for their clan-mates to come out, while Autumnleap padded over to Frostmask, his amber eyes round

with worry.

"Are you okay?" he whispered. "Pineshade said... I can't believe he's gone."

Frostmask shook her head slightly.

"I'm okay," she muttered. "But... yeah. Elmclaw and I will tell everyone in a moment."

Autumnleap nodded, giving her a quick lick on her cheek before he turned, leaving only Elmclaw and Frostmask at the foot of the Clanrock. Autumnleap headed over to join Poolcloud and Dewleaf in front of the nursery, blocking the view of the curious kits peering out of the entrance behind them. By now the camp was full of cats as everyone emerged from the dens— even Cricketsong and Hollowshade had entered back in camp.

Everyone seemed to sense that something important had occurred since no one demanded answers for why they'd been shaken so rudely from their nests. In fact, there was hardly any speaking at all; most cats just gazed at her in silence, waiting for her to explain what was going on.

Although the emotion was dampened by grief, some nerves still swirled in Frostmask's stomach from the intensity of all their gazes. This was the first time that she's made any sort of announcement in front of the *entire* clan. She glanced over at Elmclaw, hoping he'd want to speak first, but he just nodded at her to go. Frostmask steeled herself and stepped forward.

"I'm sorry to wake you all, but I have very terrible news," she said, doing her best to project her voice enough that it reached through all parts of the camp. "Just a few moments ago, Grovepelt passed away."

Immediately, gasps echoed through the clearing, punctuated by a few mournful yowls. Frostmask bowed her head, her own grief closing her throat and threatening to choke out her voice. But, even *if* she could physically speak, she found herself unable to as all of her words dried up on her tongue. What was she supposed to say

now? Should she validate her clan-mates' grief? Comfort them? Tell them how it happened?

Her muscles loosened a fraction as Elmclaw stepped forward to her side.

"His infection grew too strong for him to fight off," Elmclaw said in a low, sorrowful voice, forcing the camp to quiet to hear him. "Sedgestar was at his side when he died and is still in the cave now. We will prepare his body for his vigil, and hold his death ceremony as soon as the light of StarClan is above us."

Sad murmurs rose from the crowd again, and cats began to huddle together for comfort as they waited for the vigil to begin, speaking to each other in soft, mournful tones. Elmclaw turned and disappeared back into the den, but Frostmask remained outside. It wasn't long before Elmclaw reemerged from the den, carrying Grovepelt with Sedgestar's help. The fragrant scent of mint and lavender drifted over to her, masking the smell of death and of the infection that had killed him. Grovepelt's shoulder was still bandaged, hiding the wound from view, although the herbs and cobwebs were purely decorative now.

Grovepelt's body was placed in the center of the clearing, and immediately, cats flocked to his side. In fact, so many clan-mates wanted to share-tongues and final words with him, it quickly became clear that some would have to wait to allow others to cycle through. However, Sedgestar was given a permanent position at Grovepelt's head, where he crouched, still silent and his eyes downcast.

Frostmask hung a bit further back from the main group around Grovepelt's body. She'd gotten the chance to speak with Grovepelt when he'd still been alive. It seemed only fair that her clan-mates who weren't able to do that got to be the first to tell him goodbye now. Clearstream stood about a tail-length away from her, hanging back as well and gazing out at the vigil and the procession of cats that waited for their turn to be with Grovepelt.

"ShadowClan has lost one of its finest warriors," Clearstream murmured to seemingly no one in particular. "And, Silverpelt will

gain one of its brightest stars."

"He was more than a deputy," Rowanheart broke in, his voice rough with grief as he lifted his head from where he crouched at Grovepelt's side. "He was like kin. Not just to me, but for everyone. All of ShadowClan was his family."

Murmurs of agreement rose up from the crowd of cats.

"He was the first cat to teach me a hunting crouch, when I was just a kit," Redclaw whispered, her green eyes welling with emotion.

"He always had the best stories and advice," Mosspounce added, hanging her head. "It didn't even matter how silly your problem was. He always wanted to help."

More meows of agreement echoed through the camp.

"There was this one time when I was a kit, I tried to climb to the top of the Oak Tree. But, I got stuck, of course, on the very first branch," Thornheart said, and although his shoulders were hunched with grief, there was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "I was too proud to call for help, but I was petrified of climbing down. It was Grovepelt who noticed my predicament. Instead of just hauling me down though, he climbed up to the branch next to me. He asked me what I was doing, but I didn't want to tell him that I needed help. So, I just said that I wanted to be there. Then he asked if that was true. I finally admitted that I was stuck, but I told him I was trying to be brave. He then asked if I wanted his help to get down, and I said yes. He carried me down from the tree, and then he told me 'There is no bravery in recklessness. But, there is bravery in vulnerability, and you were very brave today.'"

Soft, affectionate purrs rose from the crowd, and despite her sorrow, a purr vibrated in Frostmask's throat too. For the first time in a while, ShadowClan felt like one again— completely united. Although, there was its own sort of tragedy to the fact that it took the loss of a beloved member to bind the Clan back together.

"His wisdom touched everyone he spoke to," Larkfoot said in a soft voice.

"He guided us through many seasons of hardship with calm confidence," Darkpelt rumbled.

"He was one of the bravest warriors I've met," Dustleap added.

"He taught us patience and nobility," Yewstorm murmured, wrapping his silver-striped tail around himself for comfort.

"He never gave up on you, no matter what," Pineshade rasped, staring at Grovepelt's body with a pained expression.

After Pineshade spoke, the camp quieted, and everyone it seemed turned at the same time to glance at Sedgestar to hear what he had to say. He had been as quiet and still as a cat carved from stone the whole while the others were talking. He was still gazing down at Grovepelt now, but slowly, he lifted his eyes as the silence in the camp stretched on.

"Grovepelt..." Sedgestar rasped in a hoarse voice. "Grovepelt meant more to me... to *ShadowClan,* than words could ever express."

Abruptly, Sedgestar jerked to his paws.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry..." he rasped. "Please continue the vigil."

He turned and without another word vanished into his den, leaving the camp silently gazing after him.

Worry swirled in Frostmask's belly.

...Should she go talk to him? Was that part of her deputy duties? Deputies were supposed to support their leaders in times of strife, right?

Her gaze ended up meeting with Clearstream's, who seemed to read the questions in her eyes and gave her a tiny nod of encouragement. Taking a deep breath, Frostmask padded after Sedgestar, slipping into the tunnel that led down to his den. When she stepped into his den proper, she found Sedgestar sitting in his nest, staring down at his paws. But, his ears jolted up in surprise as he noticed her.

"Oh. Frostmask," he rasped. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I can leave if you want," Frostmask murmured, hesitating in the tunnel.

Sedgestar gave his head a small shake.

"No. It's alright," he muttered.

Frostmask nodded and stepped into his den before taking a seat. Sedgestar had gone back to emptily staring down at his feet. Frostmask busied herself with carefully wrapping her tail around her paws as the awkward silence continued to hang in the air. Sedgestar was the one who broke it.

"It's my fault you know."

Frostmask's brow furrowed in confusion.

"What is?" she asked.

Sedgestar didn't lift his gaze from his paws, but his jaw clenched in anguish.

"I should have never brought Grovepelt to that battle," Sedgestar growled. "I knew he was too old to fight, but I... I don't know what I was thinking."

Frostmask's ear twitched, uncertainty flickering in her.

She wasn't sure if that was actually true. Grovepelt had been old yes, but he'd still been strong and in good physical shape prior to the battle in which he'd been wounded. And, knowing the hesitance that Sedgestar had always displayed when it came to bringing Grovepelt to battles, Grovepelt had probably wanted to fight for ShadowClan. Frostmask wouldn't be surprised if he had asked for it explicitly.

"There's no changing it now," Sedgestar muttered, continuing before Frostmask could respond. "But, everything would be different if I'd just made a different choice."

Grovepelt would still be alive. And, probably still be deputy instead of me.

Frostmask shifted her paws. She was almost surprised that she didn't start sinking into the ground from the weight of grief for Grovepelt pressing on her back, and the disappointment in herself tugging her down by her feet.

As stupid as it sounded, it still was a bit of a blow to hear, out loud, that Sedgestar would prefer that she wasn't his deputy. But, what right did she have to be upset about it? If she could change the past, wouldn't she also want Grovepelt to be alive, healthy, and deputy? Of course she wanted that. So, how could she both *not* want to be deputy, but still *want* Sedgestar to want her as deputy?

Frostmask shook her ears, pushing her confusing, conflicting emotions from her mind.

"I'm very sorry," Frostmask muttered finally. "I know I will never be able to replace Grovepelt... but I will try to make him proud."

"...Thank you, Frostmask," Sedgestar rasped, lifting his eyes and blinking up at her.

Frostmask's ears pricked at the sound of paw-steps coming down the tunnel. Emberflower entered into the den, and Frostmask rose to her feet to depart, dipping her head to her and Sedgestar. Emberflower would do a much better job at comforting Sedgestar than Frostmask could anyway.

"I'll leave you now," Frostmask murmured, turning and exiting the den.

Frostmask emerged back into a camp that was just as dark and depressing as the den she'd left. Grovepelt's vigil was continuing, but it had lost the sense of community that it had earlier. Without that to take the edge off, undiluted pain hung in the air as dense as fog.

Cats were now still and silent rather than sharing their fond memories of Grovepelt with each other, and instead of being tightly grouped around Grovepelt's body, her clan-mates had dispersed throughout the camp. Whatever fragile connection that had bonded them back together was gone, and they'd returned to their own

little factions.

Frostmask sighed softly to herself, gazing out upon her divided clan.

Sedgestar is at least right about one thing. Everything is different, and nothing can go back to the way it was before.

Crises

Frostmask and her hunting patrol padded towards the thorn barrier of camp, a squirrel and a mouse dangling from her jaws. Their morning patrol had run a little long— sun-high was already almost over, and Frostmask would have to organize the evening patrols soon. But, Frostmask didn't mind the fact that she'd missed the time she could've been lounging around camp, since she'd savored every moment on this hunt.

Autumnleap, Pineshade, and Poolcloud walked nearby her, their jaws full of prey too. Even though all of their mouths were too full to talk, warm contentment kindled in Frostmask's chest, brought on just by their presence.

They'd had a quite successful hunt, and it'd been such a relief to spend it with her three closest friends. For the precious time that she'd been on the patrol with them, she could pretend like she was just a freshly named warrior again, with no greater responsibilities than hunting for her Clan.

As they approached camp though, reality began to set back in, dampening Frostmask's mood. It had only been a bit over a quarter of a moon since Grovepelt's death, and the clan felt so different without him. Not only because his presence was sorely missed, but also because of the impact of his death on her clan-mates, and Sedgestar especially.

Frostmask had never before seen Sedgestar grieve like he grieved for Grovepelt. Before this, Sedgestar hadn't been the type of leader who'd sequestered himself away in in his den. Quite the opposite in fact— he'd always been happy and eager to patrol and hunt right alongside his warriors. But, he'd hardly shown his face in camp for the past few days, and Frostmask's private 'leadership lessons' with him had been suspended, seemingly indefinitely. Frostmask still stopped by his den every night before she went to her nest to give him a report on the events of the day, but he hadn't had much input into even that recently.

Frostmask was trying her hardest to keep the clan running smoothly to let him grieve, but it was a difficult task. She was still an inexperienced deputy, who still didn't have the full respect of her clan-mates... ShadowClan needed its leader.

Frostmask was pulled from her musing as a large patrol, headed by Dampfang, emerged from the camp. For a beat, Dampfang stiffened when he caught sight of her, or perhaps of Pineshade, but then he lifted his chin in the air and strode forward confidently, his tail held high. Frostmask's brow furrowed as her gaze flickered over the cats trailing behind him— Marshnose, Kestrelmoon, Leafbreeze, Thornheart, Beeclaw, Yewstorm, Hollowshade... it seemed like an unusually large patrol.

Frostmask paused. Her friends stopped too, waiting for her as she dropped her prey at her feet to free her mouth to talk.

"Where are you off to?" Frostmask asked Dampfang as politely as possible.

She didn't want to ruin her rare good mood with an argument. She was hoping desperately that the group had a good reason for heading out into the woods prior to her assigning patrols. She wasn't a tyrant after all— if a cat and their friends had nothing else to do, and they wanted to go for a leisurely hunt, or even just have some fun in the forest, that was perfectly alright with her! But, an *eight* warrior patrol did raise a few questions. That large of a number was usually reserved for group training exercises or... battle patrols.

"Taking a patrol down the WindClan border," Dampfang said gruffly. "Remember how one of them got caught by Dustleap chasing a rabbit into our territory yesterday? I want to make sure they remember where our border is."

Frostmask's tail flicked as irritation began to nip at the ends of her pelt like a nagging fly.

That wasn't what she wanted to hear *at all.* Not only had Dampfang gone behind her back to organize a border patrol himself, but he was taking all of these other warriors on the patrol too? Was he

looking to stir up trouble from WindClan?

"I remember. Dustleap reported that to me." Frostmask tried to keep her tone mild, even though she actually felt like grinding her teeth together in frustration. "I also remember Dustleap saying that it was a young apprentice who made that mistake. Plus he didn't even catch the rabbit, and his mentor apologized immediately. I doubt that level of infraction warrants such a big border patrol. And, besides, you could have waited for me to organize the evening patrols instead of just deciding to go yourself."

I'm not even late with patrol assignments today!

Dampfang shrugged.

"You weren't here," he said cooly. "And, it doesn't hurt to be careful, right? WindClan might start thinking they can walk all over us. Especially with ShadowClan missing the last gathering..."

Frostmask struggled to keep the fur on her shoulders from bristling. But, as much as it nettled her, Dampfang's last point was a sensible one. The most recent gathering had been a few days ago, but ShadowClan hadn't attended. Sedgestar just hadn't been feeling up to it. Frostmask could have led the clan in his stead, but on top of speaking to all five clans from the Great Rock simply being a *terrifying* prospect, Frostmask doubted she would have gotten a warm reception after the strong backlash she'd received from the last gathering. She figured she needed at least several more moons for the other clans getting used to the idea of her as ShadowClan's deputy before they would be okay with her speaking in place of Sedgestar.

However, despite all that, Frostmask doubted that Dampfang had *actually* decided to lead this patrol out of a legitimate concern of a WindClan invasion.

This is just another one of Dampfang's dumb power-plays. He's just using one WindClan apprentice's foolish mistake to justify it.

"Fine. You can lead the evening border patrol for WindClan today," Frostmask said sourly. "But, Hollowshade, Yewstorm, you two aren't

on it. Rabbitstar is a testy cat. If he sees a border patrol of eight warriors, he'll think that you're hoping to cause trouble."

Dampfang's eyes narrowed.

"Fine," he hissed, signaling for his remaining patrol members to follow him with a flick of his tail.

"And, Dampfang," Frostmask called to his back before he stalk off into the woods. *"Don't* start a fight unnecessarily."

Dampfang just growled in response. As his patrol left, Hollowshade and Yewstorm stayed behind, looking uncertain as to what they were supposed to do now. Frostmask gestured for them to follow her as she picked up her prey and walked to the thorn barrier, slipping in through the narrow tunnel. Once she was back in camp, she dismissed the younger warriors with a nod, and she and her friends headed to the fresh-kill pile to deposit their catches.

Although frustration with Dampfang still bubbled right beneath her skin, it at least brought Frostmask some satisfaction to see the stocked fresh-kill pile. Green-leaf had brought plenty of prey back to ShadowClan's territory. In fact, the fresh-kill pile was so well-stocked at the moment, she may not even have to send out hunting patrols for the evening.

"What a *snake-heart,"* Autumnleap growled as soon as he had dropped his prey onto the pile and freed his mouth. "I swear, Dampfang has gotten more annoying with ever passing sunrise, for *everyday* of our lives."

"You did a good job handling him though," Poolcloud added, giving Frostmask an approving nod.

"I wish he would just *listen* to me," Frostmask groaned, her fur spiking with irritation as she turned away from the fresh-kill pile to face her friends. "So, I wouldn't have to 'handle' him. I'm not even asking for him to like me. I just want him to stop treading on my tail for fun! I've already been deputy for more than a moon, but I still have to spend so much of my time trying to stop him from undermining me! And, it seems like he's only gotten more bold

recently. It's exhausting."

Frostmask's brow furrowed as her irritation took on an edge of anxiety. Would Dampfang ever give up? Paledusk had advised her that Dampfang would fall in line with time, but it was starting to seem like the opposite...

"You have to keep at it though," Autumnleap said, his brow furrowing with concern. "He'll just get worse if he thinks he's wearing you down."

Frostmask sighed, a faint headache forming behind her eyes.

"I guess. But, I don't even understand what he hopes to gain from this. Does he really think that this petty behavior will impress Sedgestar?" she growled.

Frostmask glanced over at Pineshade, hoping that she would have some sort of insight. But, Pineshade just shifted from paw to paw, avoiding looking at Frostmask directly.

"Can you try talking to him about it?" Frostmask asked her.

She felt a bit bad about the request— she didn't enjoy forcing anyone to have the displeasure of speaking with Dampfang. But, the truth was, Pineshade was probably her best shot at making Dampfang to stop.

Pineshade sighed, her ears flattening.

"I can try. But, I already know he's not going to listen to me," she muttered glumly.

Frostmask reached up to rub a paw across her weary face. If even Pineshade couldn't do a thing to stop Dampfang, then the situation was truly hopeless.

"It's alright," Frostmask said. "If you know he's not going to listen, then it's probably not worth just starting a fight, right? It'll just make him more mad and impossible to deal with. And, upset you."

Pineshade nodded, her gaze downcast like she was guilty that she

couldn't do more. Frostmask's tail flicked with agitated energy as her thoughts remained fixated on the issue of Dampfang, gnawing at it like a bone.

"I just wish I knew more about what Dampfang's been up to..." Frostmask muttered, and her gaze was pulled away from her friends and towards Yewstorm, who was still nearby.

An idea suddenly forming in her mind, Frostmask left her friends with a hasty wave of her tail and trotted over to Yewstorm.

"Hey, Yewstorm."

He glanced over at her, and Frostmask was once again struck by how much the young silver-and-black striped warrior looked like Swoopstrike.

"Yes Frostmask?" he asked, dipping his head respectfully.

In that way though, he was very unlike Swoopstrike. Yewstorm was always amiable— taking much more strongly after his father, Rowanheart, and his friendly earnestness in that regard. Apparently even Dampfang hadn't found a reason to dislike Yewstorm, given that he'd assigned him to his patrol.

"Did Dampfang say why he wanted so many cats on that patrol with him?" Frostmask asked, trying to keep her tone casual even as her paws prickled with eagerness.

This could be just the thing she needed to put a stop to Dampfang's interference! If Yewstorm had proof that Dampfang had been looking to start an unsanctioned fight with WindClan, as Frostmask suspected, then that would be a big enough offense that she'd have grounds to go to Sedgestar and have Dampfang properly disciplined.

And, if everyone knew that Dampfang had been reprimanded, her clan-mates wouldn't keep listening to him, and so he couldn't keep undermining her. It was the perfect plan!

Although, it wouldn't be *entirely* without its downsides... After all, it would probably make Dampfang absolutely furious with Frostmask.

But, it's not like he could hate her anymore than he already did, right?

But, all of Frostmask's fragile hope crumbled when Yewstorm shook his head.

"No, he didn't say," he meowed. "Dampfang just told me to come with him on the WindClan border patrol."

Frostmask huffed out a soft sigh, disappointment curling in her belly.

"That's fine, Yewstorm."

"Were we not supposed to go out on that patrol?" Yewstorm's ears flicked nervously in the face of her disappointment. "I was just doing what Dampfang said."

"...Typically, it's my job as deputy to assign the border patrols," Frostmask said, delicately choosing her words.

She didn't want to come across as totally incompetent, like she'd been letting Dampfang walk all over her. But, she also didn't blame Yewstorm for being confused about who gave the orders for what patrols. Yewstorm had been made a warrior right when she became deputy, and so he'd only ever experienced Frostmask's, admittedly, *not-always-super-punctual* patrol assignments and Dampfang stirring up chaos by undermining her.

"Dampfang hadn't told me beforehand that he wanted to patrol down WindClan's border. So, I would have appreciated it if he cleared it with me first before he gathered the patrol," Frostmask said.

Yewstorm's ears flattened.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

"It's alright," Frostmask assured quickly. "I don't blame you for it."

"I won't go on a patrol with him again, unless I know that you've approved it," Yewstorm promised solemnly.

A soft purr rose in Frostmask's throat for a moment.

"I appreciate that, thank yo—" Frostmask's voice trailed off as she tilted her head to the side, struck with another idea. "Actually... on second thought, if Dampfang orders you to go on a border patrol in the future, do it. But, afterwards, come find me and tell me what happened."

Yewstorm's brow furrowed, and he blinked, the confusion on his face palpable.

"Okay... if that's what you want," he said slowly. "But, why? I thought you just said that Dampfang wasn't supposed to send out patrols by himself?"

Because I want to know what Dampfang hopes to gain by doing this, and what he's up to on these patrols. But, I can't without you reporting back, because Dampfang is smart enough to not invite cats he knows that I'm close to on his patrols with him.

But, Frostmask didn't say that out loud, only shifting her paws a bit uneasily. If she told Yewstorm the truth, would he find her idea too underhanded and refuse to agree? Yewstorm was a straight-forward kind of cat...

"Border patrols often report back to me once they return to camp. But, if I didn't know that a patrol had been sent out, since some other cat did it, then I'm afraid that I wouldn't know if something important happened," Frostmask said, happy to have come up with a semi-truthful justification. "So if something like today ever happens to you again, I would really appreciate it if you wouldn't mind reporting to me about it afterwards."

Yewstorm's green eyes brightened.

"Oh, that makes sense! Sure, you can count on me, Frostmask."

A purr began to rumble in Frostmask's throat.

"Thank you Yewstorm," she said, giving him a nod before heading off.

While she'd been talking with him, Autumnleap, Pineshade, and Poolcloud had joined Dewleaf in front of the nursery to share some prey and keep an eye on Poolcloud's and Dewleaf's four kits. The kits raced circles around the adults and tumbled across the ground, wrestling.

Frostmask's purr grew louder at the sight of the kittens. They were nearing a moon and a half old now, and their different personalities had really started to blossom. The color of their eyes has also just started to shift into their adult shades. Mudkit and Sprucekit had gotten their mother's blue-green eyes, while Lichenkit and Fogkit had their father's amber.

Frostmask cast a quick glance up at the sky to check the sun's position. She would have to assign the evening ThunderClan border patrol soon, but she still had the time to grab a quick meal and watch the kits play.

Frostmask picked a mouse from the fresh-kill pile and started to pad over to the nursery. But, before she could make it over there, she caught sight of Cedarfur walking with Lizardstrike towards the thorn barrier. Cedarfur waved his tail at Hollowshade and Yewstorm to call them over to them, and the group of four continued on towards the thorn barrier. Frostmask watched them walk away, her paws prickling indecisively.

Should she just let them go and do... whatever it was that they were doing? Dampfang at least didn't seem behind this patrol, since he wasn't there at the moment. But, Cedarfur had been Dampfang's apprentice...

Sighing to herself, Frostmask dropped her mouse on the ground and hurried after the group, reaching them just before Cedarfur could lead them into the tunnel and out of camp.

"Hey! What are you guys up to?" she called.

The group turned to her, and Lizardstrike's ears pricked as he gave her a warm tail-wave of hello. Hollowshade, however, looked much less pleased at Frostmask interrupting her patrol for the second time in such quick succession, while Yewstorm just seemed confused.

"We're just going on a hunting patrol," Cedarfur said, giving her a nod of greeting.

Frostmask tilted her head to the side.

"Hunting?" she echoed, somewhat bemused.

What had given Cedarfur the idea that more hunting was necessary? The pile was nearly overflowing with prey at the moment.

"Have you taken a look at the fresh-kill pile recently?"

Cedarfur blinked, his brow furrowing as he glanced behind her to catch a glimpse of the bursting fresh-kill pile.

"Oh..." he meowed a bit uncertainly. "So, uh, no hunting? Dampfang told me..."

Frostmask's pelt fluffed out as her earlier annoyance with Dampfang all came rushing back with a vengeance.

Of course it was him!

"We have a lot of fresh-kill in camp, which we should eat through before we hunt anymore, especially in this heat. We risk perfectly good food rotting if we're wasteful and flippant with the amount of prey we catch," Frostmask said in clipped tones, her frustration with Dampfang making her words to Cedarfur a bit more curt than she'd originally intended.

"I'm er— sorry," Cedarfur mumbled, his ears flat with embarrassment as he avoided her gaze. "I hadn't thought about that."

Frostmask exhaled slowly, trying to curb her frustration. Scolding Cedarfur would not win her any battles. Cedarfur had always been hard for her to read— he'd been Dampfang's apprentice, but he never showed the vitriol Dampfang did towards her. Similarly, Cedarfur and Lizardstrike had remained friends, despite Dampfang's disdain for Lizardstrike.

But, on the other paw, Frostmask seriously doubted that Cedarfur could have come out of his apprenticeship completely unscathed from Dampfang's influence. For one thing, although he was too good at hiding his feelings and too polite to say it to her face, she didn't think Cedarfur *actually* liked her. At least not in the way he genuinely liked Lizardstrike.

Cedarfur's impression of her must surely be colored by negatives cast by Dampfang, and being mad at him would do nothing to change that outlook— only add to it.

"It's okay," Frostmask said, calming down. "Just check with me next time, if you're not sure about if we need more hunting patrols, alright?"

Cedarfur nodded, and the other three young warriors awkwardly shifted from paw to paw from behind him. Frostmask felt a flash of sympathy for them. She didn't want to ruin their fun by barring the young cats from going out into the forest, but the Clan really didn't need more prey at the moment...

"If you're still interested in doing something, I haven't sent out an evening ThunderClan border patrol yet. You all can take care of that, if you want."

Although, as soon as the words left her mouth, Frostmask became unsure about if that was the best idea. She didn't normally send groups of young warriors alone on border patrols. It just generally seemed more appropriate to give the lead of the patrol to a more experienced warrior, and also having only young warriors patrol the border was a bit risky in case they ran into some kind of trouble with a neighboring clan.

But, this was *ThunderClan*— ShadowClan's border with them was peaceful. And, besides, Frostmask and her friends had hunted alone on SkyClan's territory when they were freshly named warriors. Surely that was far more risky than a boring, old border patrol?

I should trust that they are well trained enough to handle themselves, if they do end up in a dangerous situation.

Frostmask blinked as another idea formed in her mind.

And, plus... maybe this could also get Dampfang off my tail a bit, if he sees that I've given his former apprentice more responsibility.

Cedarfur's ears pricked.

"Really?" he asked, his chest puffing out slightly.

Frostmask shrugged, making her mind up.

"Yeah, sure why not," she said.

The others behind Cedarfur perked up as well, but Frostmask quickly stepped forward before they could get too excited.

"Just stay alert, alright? There's still been a lot of fox scent in that area recently, remember," she said. "If you come across it, report back to camp instead of engaging."

She received dutiful nods in response, although they all also fidgeted with impatience. Frostmask figured that they must be eager to have her stop lecturing them, so they could get back to hanging out.

I've become the boring, older warrior. And, I'm not even close to being old!

Frostmask nodded back at them to dismiss them, but as they started to leave, her gaze drifted towards Lizardstrike and worry twinged in her chest. While Cedarfur, Yewstorm, and Hollowshade slipped through the thorn barrier, Frostmask held Lizardstrike back for a moment with a gentle touch of her tail-tip to his side.

'You'll be careful, right?' she asked, switching to paw-signing. *'Stay close to the others. Foxes are nasty, and there's only four of you on the patrol...'*

'I know. I understood the warning. Besides, I'll scent the fox coming long before it could get to us,' Lizardstrike responded swiftly, dismissing her concern with a careless flick of his tail.

'Not with the reek of the thunderpath clogging your nose,' Frostmask pointed out.

Lizardstrike's ears angled back.

'Relax. I'll be fine,' he signed, his motions jerky with annoyance.

Although he was signing to her, his gaze was fixed on the thorn tunnel, impatiently watching after where his friends had disappeared.

Frostmask sighed to herself.

I'm just worried about you.

Relenting, she stepped away from Lizardstrike, waving at her tail for him to go. Lizardstrike eagerly stepped forward, but then, as if he'd sensed her thoughts, he turned to her to bunt his head against her shoulder. He lifted his head back up with a purr and gave her a final, reassuring blink before hurrying after the rest of his patrol.

Frostmask slowly made her way back across camp, picking up the mouse she'd abandoned on the ground and finally reaching where Pineshade, Autumnleap, Dewleaf, Poolcloud and the kits were. She plopped to the ground next to Autumnleap with a huff, leaning against his warm, steady side as she tucked into her meal.

"What was that about?" he asked, angling his ears to indicate where she'd just been standing near the thorn barrier with the younger warriors.

"Just taking care of some dumb deputy stuff," she muttered. "The good news is, the patrols are all sorted for the evening."

Autumnleap nudged her shoulder eagerly with his muzzle.

"Then you're basically free for the rest of the day!" he purred. "So, don't look so stressed!"

Frostmask released a breath, as if she could expel her poor mood.

"You're right," Frostmask said. "I—"

"Oh, Frostmask! Look at this new battle move!" Fogkit yowled, disengaging from his wrestling with Sprucekit and dashing over to her.

He came to a skidding, ungraceful stop in front of her before reclining back on his haunches and batting the air in front of him with both paws.

Having clearly sensed an opening, Sprucekit crouched and leapt at her brother, easily knocking the already slightly off-balance Fogkit over and onto his back.

"Ow! No fair, I wasn't watching!" Fogkit hissed, aiming a bat at Sprucekit's face with a paw as she stood triumphantly over him.

Sprucekit ducked his paw, sticking out her tongue.

"*Yes* fair," she crowed. "You should have been paying better attention, frog-brain!"

"I don't have frog-brain!" Fogkit grumbled, beginning to swat at Sprucekit more vigorously.

"Yes you do! Frog-brain! Frog-brain!" Sprucekit declared gleefully, dancing out of the range of Fogkit's flailing paws.

"Sprucekit, don't call Fogkit a frog-brain," Poolcloud chided, his brow furrowing with disapproval.

"Why?" she chirped, still dancing around the prone Fogkit.

"Because it's a bad thing to say to your brother," Poolcloud said.

Sprucekit paused her gloating to tilt her head to the side in confusion, sending an innocent green-eyed glance over at her father.

"But, Pineshade calls *you* a frog-brain all the time!" Sprucekit pointed out.

Autumnleap huffed out a laugh that he quickly tried to cover with a cough, and Frostmask found herself swallowing back a purr as well.

Pineshade, however, made no effort to hide her amusement, instead she lifted her chin as her eye gleamed with humor and pride for Sprucekit.

"She's got you there, Poolcloud." Pineshade glanced towards Sprucekit to give her an approving nod. "Excellent rebutta—"

Pineshade was cut off by Poolcloud thumping his tail across her muzzle.

"Sometimes..." Poolcloud meowed thoughtfully, "the right thing to do is the *opposite* of what Pineshade says."

Now, Frostmask, Autumnleap and Dewleaf didn't hold back their purrs— although Pineshade's face screwed up in displeasure, and Sprucekit looked equally as doubtful. But, Pineshade didn't argue with Poolcloud, instead just ducking out from under his bushy tail and swiping his black and white strands of fur from her mouth with irritable flicks of her paw.

Fogkit was still lying in the ground in front of Frostmask, and he gazed up at her with wide amber eyes.

"Did you see my battle move?" he asked plaintively.

"I did," Frostmask reassured him with a warm blink. "It looked great."

Fogkit's ears pricked as he cheered up considerably, rolling over onto his belly. Lichenkit then came trotting over to him, but Frostmask's attention was pulled away from them as Mudkit barreled towards her, launching himself up her side and onto her back.

"I want a badger ride!" he declared, his paws eagerly kneading into her shoulders.

Frostmask's purr rumbled louder, and she turned to glance back at the impatient kit.

"At least let me finish my meal—"

"Lichenkit!" Dewleaf cut in suddenly, her voice clipped with concern. "What have you got there?"

Frostmask's gaze was quickly brought back to Lichenkit, who was now standing in front of Fogkit. Her mouth was full of a greenish mush, staining the fur of her muzzle. Lichenkit had evidently smeared some of it across the top of Fogkit's head, and she froze with a paw out-stretched, caught in the act of adding more to her brother's fur.

"Leaves," Lichenkit mumbled around the lump in her mouth.

"What kind of leaves?" Dewleaf asked, her tone calm, although her fur was prickling and she was already on her paws, as if preparing to rush Lichenkit to the medicine cat's den if she'd gotten into something poisonous.

Dewleaf at least looked a lot more composed than Poolcloud, whose eyes were stretched so wide that it seemed as if he was on the verge of fainting.

Thankfully, Lichenkit just flicked her tail towards the bramble bush that formed the den of the nursery, and the adults all let out a collective sigh of relief. Frostmask sagged back down against Autumnleap's side, making Mudkit wobble a bit on her back.

Bramble leaves were nothing to be concerned about. The worst they'd do to Lichenkit was give her a bit of a bellyache if she ate a lot of them.

Thankfully, Frostmask didn't think that anything poisonous grew in camp anyway, where the kits could get to them. But, Frostmask didn't blame Dewleaf for checking.

Dewleaf took a seat again next to Poolcloud, visibly more relaxed.

"Why are you putting bramble leaves on Fogkit's head?" Dewleaf asked.

Lichenkit spat the leaf-mush out on the ground in order to free her mouth to speak.

"Elmclaw put leaves on Mosspounce's pad when she hurt her paw," Lichenkit said. "To fix it."

Dewleaf's brow furrowed in concern, and she glanced at Fogkit.

"Is Fogkit hurt?" she asked.

Lichenkit blinked.

"I'm fixing Fogkit's frog-brain," she explained matter-of-factly.

"I don't *really* have frogs in my brain, right?" Fogkit asked, his eyes stretching wide and a hint of a wail drifting into his voice at the horrifying prospect.

"No, Fogkit. Of course you don't," Poolcloud soothed, rising to his paws to pad over to him, where he began to clean the green leaf-juices from his head with swift swipes of his tongue.

"He doesn't?" Lichenkit echoed in surprise.

"No, frog-brain!" Sprucekit broke in, her tail held high and quivering with barely contained amusement. "'Frog-brain' just means you're stupid!"

"I bet Pineshade taught you that too, huh?" Poolcloud growled, shooting a sour look towards his sister.

Pineshade ducked her head and suddenly seemed very interested in grooming her paws.

Lichenkit's whole blue-grey pelt puffed out in offense, so the little kit looked twice as big as normal.

"I'm *not* stupid," she growled at Sprucekit.

Sprucekit opened her mouth to respond, but Poolcloud interrupted her before she could.

"Sprucekit, say you're sorry for calling your siblings frog-brains," he said sternly.

Sprucekit hesitated for a moment as if she was thinking of disobeying. But, then she relented, bowing her head to avoid eye-contact.

"I'm sorry for calling you a frog-brain," she echoed.

Lichenkit still glared at her— evidently her apology was not accepted.

"Lichenkit," Dewleaf said, refocusing her attention. "It's nice that you wanted to help Fogkit, but you can't eat strange plants, alright?"

"It's not strange," Lichenkit muttered, mutinously kicking a pebble across the ground with a paw. "It's the bramble bush. And, Elmclaw does it."

"Elmclaw is a trained medicine cat," Dewleaf said. "He's much more familiar with what plants are safe or not."

Lichenkit twitched her tail, still not convinced.

Once Poolcloud finished cleaning Fogkit's head, he returned to Dewleaf's side, lying next to her. Mudkit, seemingly having forgotten about his request for a badger ride, sprung off of Frostmask's back to begin wrestling with Fogkit. Sprucekit joined them only moments later as if no argument had happened, although Lichenkit stalked away from her littermates, drifting off towards the edge of the camp alone. Frostmask noticed that Dewleaf was keeping a closer eye on Lichenkit's wandering this time.

"Maybe I'll ask Elmclaw if Lichenkit can help him with the 'leaves' the next time a cat comes in with a scraped pad," Dewleaf said, although not loudly enough for her words to reach the kits.

Poolcloud's ears pricked in surprise.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? The kits aren't even two moons old yet. Will Lichenkit even be able to handle helping? And, will Elmclaw even want to put up with her?" he asked.

"I guess I'll see what Elmclaw says," Dewleaf said, her ears twisting

back uncertainly. "But, if Lichenkit insists on chewing strange plants, I'd prefer she'd do it with his permission than without. And, besides, with her still being so young, maybe being made to help the medicine cat will make her lose interest more quickly."

"Or, it'll encourage her," Poolcloud pointed out, his tail flicking with agitation. "She is the most stubborn of the bunch. And, that's saying something."

"Well, maybe that would end up being a good thing!" Autumnleap broke in, giving Poolcloud a soothing glance. "She already likes plants. Maybe that means she'll want to be Elmclaw's apprentice and be a medicine cat."

Frostmask finished her food as she listened to her friends speculate about the kits' future. But, her ears pricked with attention as she spotted Larkfoot padding over. She'd been keeping Amberberry company as her older, rowdier litter ran around camp, but perhaps she wanted to check in on Dewleaf and her grandkits. To Frostmask surprise though, Larkfoot seemed to be instead heading in her direction. Frostmask quickly dipped her head to the well-respected queen as she stopped in front of her.

"Frostmask, I was hoping to make a request," Larkfoot purred, blinking at Frostmask kindly.

"Of course, Larkfoot. What do you need?" Frostmask asked, giving her a polite nod.

Larkfoot tilted her head to the side.

"It's just that the moss in the nursery needs a change. I try to do it myself since I know we don't have any apprentices around at the moment. But, it's gotten a lot to keep up with, especially now that Dewleaf's kits are so active too. It feels like they track mud through the den and destroy the nest every other day!"

Frostmask blinked, quickly running through a mental list of the warriors who were still in camp and could help out. She could see Dustleap chatting with Darkpelt from across camp, but she'd rather change out all the dirty moss in camp herself than ask him to do it!

Snakeeyes and Rowanheart were out in camp too, lying in the sunlight and sharing tongues, but they looked so peaceful... Still though, there were not many other options for warriors in sight.

Where are Cricketsong and Featherfall? Of course I had to let the patrol of nearly all the youngest warriors go out of camp just when the bedding needed to be changed!

Larkfoot was still looking at Frostmask, her gaze expectant.

"I'll have someone take care of it," Frostmask meowed hastily.

"Thank you," Larkfoot purred. "While you're at it, you might find someone check the elders for ticks. You know how bad they can get with this warmer weather. And, Darkpelt won't admit it, but his bad leg stiffens up sometimes and limits his flexibility, making it hard for him to check himself. He has been going on all these walks outside of camp though... So, could you have someone make sure to check him specifically? But, do try to be discreet or delicate about it. After all, he's still doesn't like the 'elder' title. You know how proud he is."

Frostmask nodded along glumly, her stomach sinking in apprehension.

Grooming a resistant Darkpelt will probably be as easy as grooming a grumpy badger!

"I'll take care of it," Frostmask parroted.

"Thank you," Larkfoot purred again. "You're doing a wonderful job, dear."

Frostmask purred in response, but Larkfoot's praise rung hollow in her ears. After Larkfoot gave Dewleaf a few affectionate licks on the head and padded off, Frostmask turned to her friends, her eyes widening appealingly.

"Oh no. You're not going to make *us* do it, right?" Autumnleap asked, catching her look. "Can't one of the younger warriors do it instead?"

"I don't know who else I should ask!" Frostmask groaned. "I stupidly let Hollowshade, Yewstorm, Lizardstrike, and Cedarfur out on a patrol. I don't think Cricketsong or Featherfall are in camp."

"They aren't," Dewleaf broke in. "I don't know what they're up to, but they left camp together before your patrol came back."

Frostmask nodded at Dewleaf gratefully for the explanation.

"I'm not going to ask Dustleap to do it—"

"You could," Pineshade interrupted, her spiky-furred tail starting to twitch slightly. "And, maybe you should. You're the deputy."

Frostmask shook her head firmly.

"Dustleap is so traditional. He'll throw a fit at the idea that he needs to be the one taking care of apprentice-rank chores when there's younger cats around."

"So what?" Pineshade fired back, her amber eye narrowing. "You *outrank* him. You can ask *any* of the warriors to do any of the chores. The sooner they realize that, the better."

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"I shouldn't make waves," she insisted. "Especially not now, when Sedgestar isn't... around. I just need to stick to the status quo."

Pineshade tossed her head with a huff.

"What if the opposite is true? Now's your chance to assert your authority. Show them you can be a good leader, even without Sedgestar!"

Frostmask's ears flicked nervously. Would that really be the best thing to do? What if it just pushed the cats who didn't like her further away? If they were already unhappy, wouldn't this just make it worse?

"But, a good leader doesn't play favorites, right?" Frostmask swept an imploring gaze over her companions, hoping to shift the topic

away from Pineshade's question. "Just because you all are my friends, doesn't mean you should get out of chores."

Pineshade snorted.

"Yeah. But, it's also not fair if you end up asking us to do it every time because you're too mouse-hearted to ask the older warriors," she scoffed.

Frostmask could feel Autumnleap stiffen beside her as he turned defensive on her behalf.

"Pineshade!" Autumnleap said, his lips curling back to reveal the tips of his fangs. "Shut up."

"I'm *trying* to help, frog-brain!" Pineshade snarled back, her ears flattening against her head.

"Guys! Don't fight in front of the kits!" Poolcloud hissed through his teeth, glaring at his siblings.

Dewleaf stepped between Poolcloud, Pineshade and Autumnleap, effectively severing the tension crackling between the littermates as she cut off their line-of-sight for each other. She turned to her mate.

"Maybe having you check Darkpelt for ticks isn't such a bad idea," she meowed. "It'll give you two more time to bond."

"What!?" The fur on Poolcloud's back rose in fear. "But, your father hates me!"

"How can he hate you?" Autumnleap said, his voice rough with surprise. "You're nice to like... everyone!"

"He doesn't hate you." Dewleaf gave Poolcloud a reassuring blink.

"He doesn't think I'm good enough for you," Poolcloud pointed out, his tail flicking anxiously.

Dewleaf rolled her eyes.

"Yeah he'd think that about anyone. That doesn't mean he hates

you."

"You know what's the *literal* first thing he said to me after the kits were born?" Poolcloud glanced over at Frostmask and his littermates. *"'Thank StarClan they take after Dewleaf.'"*

Dewleaf's eyes crinkled in an amusement that wasn't reflected back in Poolcloud's expression.

"I'm sure he was joking."

Poolcloud scoffed, shaking his head.

"You didn't see his face. He was *very* serious."

"I'm telling you, he *likes* you!" Dewleaf huffed, her amusement fading to be replaced with exasperation.

"Then why is it that every time I talk to him, it feels like he's giving me an assessment instead of having a conversation?" Poolcloud demanded.

"That's just how he is! Darkpelt doesn't know *how* to have a normal conversation. Why do you think Dampfang turned out the way he did? It wasn't Larkfoot!"

"Um—" Frostmask broke in, hesitantly interrupting the mates' quarreling. "Does that mean that you'll take care of Darkpelt's ticks, Poolcloud?"

"He will," Dewleaf answered for him.

Poolcloud's ears twisted back with uncertainty, but he didn't disagree with his mate.

Frostmask gazed at Autumnleap and Pineshade.

"Will you two help me change the moss in the nursery then?" she asked.

Autumnleap nodded, albeit a tad reluctantly.

"Fine," Pineshade huffed. "But you owe me."

Without too much more fussing, the three of them departed from Dewleaf and the kits while Poolcloud headed over to the elders. Frostmask, Autumnleap, and Pineshade soon fell back into the old patterns from their apprentice days as the monotony of the task set in. They split the nursery between them without needing to speak and begun the process of scraping up the old bedding.

They worked quietly for a bit as they removed the old moss from the den, and Frostmask was in the middle of bundling up the last of the dirty moss when a faint, panicked yowl drifted into her ears. She stiffened, the moss in her jaws falling to the ground as her head jerked up. She exchanged a wide-eyed glance with Pineshade and Autumnleap, but only for a heartbeat before they were rushing out of the nursery and into the camp clearing.

The others out there had clearly heard the cry too. Darkpelt was on his paws, his tail lashing in agitation. Snakeeyes' and Rowanheart's pelts were bristling. Murmurstep stuck her head out of the warriors' den, blinking sleep from her eyes as her ears pricked and swiveled, searching for more sound.

Only a moment later, the rapid thrumming of a set of paw-steps vibrated through the air. Then the thorn barrier shivered, and Yewstorm burst through the tunnel, gasping for breath, his eyes wide and wild as blood dripped from his flank.

"Yewstorm! What's wrong?" Snakeeyes gasped, haring over to her son, Rowanheart hot on her tail.

"Help— We need help—" Yewstorm panted, his legs trembling from the run. "Fox attack— Our patrol—"

Frostmask stiffened as if she'd suddenly become paralyzed, her pelt rising as icy fear rushed through her.

Lizardstrike!

"Where?!" Snakeeyes demanded, sinking unsheathed claws into the damp ground, but Yewstorm had gone back to panting too hard to

answer immediately.

Frostmask jolted out of her silent panic as Pineshade nudged her shoulder sharply with her muzzle.

"Don't just stand there!" Pineshade hissed in her ear, her amber eye blazing. "Send reinforcements after them!"

Frostmask sucked in a deep breath and nodded hard, opening her jaws to call out to a few warriors.

"My kits!" Amberberry's wail suddenly cut in. "Where are Mallowkit and Marigoldkit?!"

Frostmask's muzzle whipped towards Amberberry's cry, and she saw the distraught queen frantically darting around camp, sticking her head in every den, and wailing again each time as she realized her kits weren't inside. Her remaining kit, Minnowkit, trailed after her mother, her eyes wide and fearful.

"The fox has gotten them! I just know it!" Amberberry screeched, her tail thrashing in a frenzy as she dug her claws into the ground.

Dewleaf's fur bristled in fear as she rapidly gathered up her kits, herding them to the nursery while Poolcloud sprinted over to help her guard them. Meanwhile Larkfoot rushed to Amberberry's side, pressing her pelt against the younger queen's and covering her ears with licks, murmuring soothing words to her.

Frostmask froze again, horrid indecision swirling in her belly like a hurricane.

What takes priority? Helping the patrol or looking for Amberberry's kits?

Frostmask's gaze flashed to the Oak Tree, praying to see movement in the shadows of the roots, and that it would be Sedgestar striding out to take charge. But, the shadows there were still. Frostmask glanced back at her frightened clan. Elmclaw was out and treating Yewstorm's wounds now, while some of her clan-mates were dashing around camp, looking for the missing kits. But, many had also turned desperate eyes onto Frostmask, looking for direction.

"L-let me speak to Sedgestar!" she stammered quickly before whirling around and sprinting towards her leader's den.

She didn't waste time on calling out a greeting, simply barreling into the tunnel and bursting into the the earthen cave.

"Sedgestar—"

Frostmask blinked. The den was empty. Neither Sedgestar nor Emberflower were there, just an empty nest.

Where is he?!

Frostmask's anxiety started to tick up, creeping up in her throat. Frostmask whipped around and hurried back out of the den. As she burst back into clearing, she almost ran right into Autumnleap and Pineshade, who had followed her over to the Oak Tree and were gazing at her intently.

"He's not here!" Frostmask hissed, trying and failing to hide the growing panic in her voice.

Autumnleap's eyes widened in fear, but Pineshade's gaze hardened.

"Don't panic. You can do this," Pineshade said firmly. "Just send some cats after Yewstorm's patrol, and organize some others to help Amberyberry find her kits."

Frostmask nodded, taking a shaky breath.

"Okay. Okay. You're right. Rowanheart, Snakeeyes, Pineshade and I will go after the patrol and the fox by the ThunderClan border—"

"No," Pineshade cut her off, her tail flicking. "Amberberry is *freaking out* and as soon as she finds out Sedgestar isn't in camp, it'll just get worse. You stay here and help her look for her kits, or she's going to give herself a heart attack. We can take care of one dumb fox."

"Lizardstrike is on that patrol!" Frostmask protested, her claws unsheathing and sinking into the ground. "And, what if it's more than one fox?"

"I'm sure Lizardstrike's parents will make sure he's okay," Pineshade pointed out quickly, her pelt prickling with impatience. "But, if we need another cat, I'll take this oaf."

Pineshade flicked her tail against Autumnleap's side. Autumnleap blinked, his brow furrowing as if he was trying to decide if now was the appropriate time to get offended that Pineshade had just called him an 'oaf.'

It seemed like the urgency of the situation won out, since his expression smoothed and he lifted his chin.

"I'll go," Autumnleap agreed.

"Alright then," Frostmask said, nodding at them. "Go."

They didn't need anymore prompting then that. Autumnleap and Pineshade whipped around and ran to Rowanheart and Snakeeyes. After only a moment of conversing with them and Yewstorm, likely figuring out the exact location of his patrol, the four cats were streaming out of camp at full-pelt.

Frostmask watched them leave, an odd feeling of helplessness wrapping around her chest and threatening to suffocate her. Was this how Sedgestar felt when he sent cats to go fight on ShadowClan's behalf? Of course Frostmask trusted her clan-mates to fight well, but it hardly seemed fair to order them to go risk injury or even death while she stayed behind. No wonder Sedgestar was almost aways at the front of every battle patrol.

And, please StarClan, let Lizardstrike be okay.

Frostmask shook her head sharply. She couldn't waste time worrying about them now. Even if Amberberry's kits were fine at the moment, having just wandered out of camp, the queen was right that with a fox lurking around, they could end up in deadly danger in just a flick of a tail.

Frostmask rushed over to Amberberry, where she was still being soothed by Larkfoot. Murmurstep had come over to her mother too and was attempting to calm her down while she curled her tail

around Minnowkit to comfort her. Her little sibling almost got lost in the long fur of Murmurstep's tail; only her wide green eyes peeked out.

"...I just don't know when or how they could have snuck off! I was keeping an eye on them the whole time!" Amberberry was whimpering, her ears flat against her skull.

"Don't worry, we'll find them," Larkfoot promised, rasping her tongue over Amberberry's forehead.

"Or the fox will first!" Amberberry gasped.

"I can't scent any fox scent from here," Murmurstep pointed out. "And, Yewstorm's patrol was past the Burnt Sycamore when they were attacked."

"But, what if there's another fox?!" Amberberry said, still sniffling.

"The kits are definitely not in camp," Darkpelt reported, limping over to the group from where he'd done a sweep around the edge of the camp, near the thorn barrier. "We double-checked all the dens."

Frostmask's gaze tracked over the cats who remained in camp. Elmclaw had taken Yewstorm into his den and was treating him there. The other elders, Clearstream, Greytail, and Treefur, were all out, having been helping search for the missing kits too. Dewleaf was sheltering in the nursery with her kits, keeping them safe and out of the way, while Poolcloud sat in front of the den, guarding them. The only other warriors around were Dustleap, who was up in the lower branches of the Oak Tree, checking the canopy for the wayward kits, and Redclaw and Weaseltail, who sniffed around the clearing, trying to catch a scent trail. But, Frostmask knew that was a near futile task, especially given the numerous other cat scents in the camp.

"I'll lead a patrol out to go track them down," Frostmask said.

"Yes, but make sure you leave some warriors in camp so if a fox comes here, the other kits will be protected," Amberberry fretted.

"Mom, what kind of frog-brained fox would attack a camp full of

dozens of cat scents?" Murmurstep said with an exasperated sigh, her patience with Amberberry clearly running thin.

Frostmask privately agreed with Murmurstep, but she didn't say so out-loud. Amberberry was finally calming down slightly, and it would do no one any good to rile her up again.

"Would you like to come with me to search?" Frostmask asked the queen.

"No. I need to stay here with Minnowkit." Amberberry wrapped her paw around her remaining kit and pulled her out from under Murmurstep's tail before giving Minnowkit's forehead a few hard licks. "I'm not letting her out of my sight. Oh I wish Kestrelmoon was here! He could go with you."

But, Dampfang had to take him and nearly half of the clan's warriors out on a patrol. Frostmask thought sourly.

"I'll go with you, Frostmask," Murmurstep said with a nod to her, refocusing Frostmask's attention.

"Thank you. Redclaw, Weaseltail and Dustleap can stay in camp," Frostmask said, her gaze flitting over the cats as Redclaw padded over to Amberberry to give her friend a soothing lick on the shoulder. "And, Poolcloud, will you come with us too?"

Frostmask didn't want to pull Poolcloud away from his mate and kits, if he was also concerned about their safety. But, Poolcloud now seemed much more relaxed as the moments passed and there was no sign that Marigoldkit and Mallowkit had been taken by force, and no scents of dangerous creatures drifting into camp.

Poolcloud gave a nod of agreement in response to Frostmask's question and padded over to join her and Murmurstep as they slipped out of camp.

"Let's circle the thorn barrier and see if we can pick up a trail," Frostmask suggested once they were outside.

The smell of the camp was still very strong, masking individual scents, but it wasn't quite as overwhelming as it was on the inside.

Besides, checking the outside of the thorn barrier anyway would give them a chance to look for other clues of the kits' whereabouts — like paw-prints in the mud or a tuft of fur caught on some thorns.

As they prowled around the camp, Frostmask found part of her focus drifting away from her current task and deeper into the woods, her ears straining to try to hear sounds of the battle with the fox, or cries from her clan-mates for help. Murmurstep's attention also seemed divided, since every few moments she glanced out of the corner of her eyes in the direction that would take her towards the ThunderClan border.

"Pineshade went to go help the patrol with the fox, didn't she?" Murmurstep asked Frostmask in a low voice.

Frostmask's stomach turned with worry for her clan-mates. If they were lucky, Pineshade's patrol with reinforcements had already reached the fox by now, hopefully scaring it off, and her patrol, along with Lizardstrike's, would be returning to camp soon. But, Frostmask knew better than to count just on luck.

"She did," Frostmask responded.

Murmurstep glanced away from her, her tail twitching with small, anxious flicks.

"This will be the first time she's been in a fight since she lost her eye," she muttered.

Murmurstep's implication sharpened Frostmask's concern. She knew Pineshade had done battle training to get used to fighting with one eye after her injury. But, Murmurstep was right that a real fight was quite a different beast. Was Pineshade truly ready?

"She'll be okay. They all will," Frostmask said, willing herself to believe it.

Poolcloud lifted his muzzle and parted his jaws to drink in any scents on the breeze.

"There's no fox scent around here at least," he reported. "The kits probably just snuck out to go exploring. Marigoldkit is a really

adventurous one."

"How did they even get out of camp?" Murmurstep asked with a sigh. "I know Amberberry isn't always the most attentive mother. But, even she wouldn't have let them stroll right out of the thorn tunnel."

"There must be a gap somewhere in the barrier," Frostmask said. "I'll have to have it checked."

They continued their search, widening their radius from camp after no trace of the kits was found close to the thorn barrier. But, they didn't have to travel much deeper into the territory before Murmurstep paused, her pale golden head lifting.

"...Oh wait." Murmurstep's ears pricked in concentration. "I think I hear something."

She veered away from the camp and deeper into the forest, Poolcloud and Frostmask right behind her. As they trotted past the dark pine trunks, Frostmask's ears perked up as she noticed the faint noise Murmurstep had— the distinctive high-pitched mews of kits. But, as they grew closer and the voices became clearer, Frostmask quickly realized the mews had a shrill edge of fear to them.

Frostmask's stomach lurched, and as one, she, Murmurstep and Poolcloud leapt forward, sprinting towards the cries. Frostmask outpaced her larger friends as the territory shifted around them, the pines becoming less dense as they entered into the marshlands. The tall grasses were thick here, but the kits' cries were louder, guiding them forward.

"Mallowkit? Marigoldkit? Where are you?" Poolcloud bellowed.

"Over here! Help!" Marigoldkit's voice responded, now quite loud and clear.

They rushed towards his cry, bursting through the dense stems of the marsh grasses, and skidding to a stop right next to Marigoldkit and a big mud puddle. His pale orange pelt was mud splattered, but thankfully, he seemed unhurt, although his eyes were round with

fear.

"Mallowkit is stuck!" Marigoldkit wailed, flicking his tail towards the mud. "I wanted to get help, but I couldn't leave her!"

Frostmask's gaze flickered towards the mud puddle, and the fur down her spine bristled with fear as she noticed, what she thought was just a muddy lump, was actually Mallowkit. Her ginger fur was completely stained brown, and she was clearly stuck fast in the mud — only her head and the top of her back were above the surface. Her eyes shone with desperation as her muzzle stuck straight in the air, trembling slightly as she took fast, shallow breaths. She whimpered and shifted as if trying to take a step towards the patrol, but as soon as she moved, she sunk deeper into the muck.

"Don't move!" Poolcloud ordered swiftly, his long black-and-white fur bristling with fear. "We'll get you out of there!"

Frostmask's gaze flickered over the scene, her mind whirling as she tried to come up with the best way to rescue Mallowkit. She was too far in the center of the puddle for any of them to just reach over and pull her out from the firmer ground. But, there was no telling how deep the mud puddle was, so if one of them went in after her, they could risk getting trapped too.

Poolcloud turned to Frostmask and Murmurstep.

"I'm the tallest here, so I'll go into the mud to grab Mallowkit. Then if I get stuck, you two can pull me out by the tail," he said.

"But, you're so big, what if Frostmask and I can't manage it?" Murmurstep pointed out, her eyes round with worry. "Maybe I should try to grab her instead."

"Let's get a stick," Frostmask suggested. "We can see if Mallowkit can hold on to it, and we can try to pull her out that way. If that doesn't work, then one of us can get in the mud."

"Good idea," Poolcloud said with a curt nod. "You can stay here with Mallowkit and Marigoldkit, while Murmurstep and I grab one quickly."

Frostmask meowed an agreement, and her two companions whirled around and vanished into the tall grass.

"Will Mallowkit be okay?" Marigoldkit asked, his ears pinned back against his head.

The usually adventurous kit looked quite subdued as he crouched down close to the ground, shaking with fear like a leaf caught in the wind.

Maybe he feels guilty about Mallowkit ending up in trouble— assuming that this was his idea, of course.

"She'll be just fine. We just need to get her out," Frostmask said, brushing her tail against Marigoldkit's side.

Although even as she soothed him, a part of her wanted to scold the kits for their foolishness. The marsh, despite all its alluring green-leaf beauty, was one of the most hazardous parts of ShadowClan's territory, second only to the Carrionplace. And, it was especially dangerous during green-leaf when there was the swollen river to contend with, along with the deep, sticky patches of mud that would suck a cat in, as Mallowkit and Marigoldkit had unhappily discovered. Even the herons that called the marsh home were voracious predators, capable of seriously injuring or even killing a kit.

We're lucky we found them quickly.

But, there was no point in making either of the kits feel worse at the moment, especially not when Mallowkit was still stuck.

Thankfully, only a moment later, the tall grass shivered and Poolcloud and Murmurstep came back out, a long stick held between them. Murmurstep dropped her end from her jaws and pushed it towards the mud puddle as Poolcloud lowered his side to the ground too before sinking his claws into it and anchoring it in place.

"Okay Mallowkit, grab this in your mouth once it's in front of you, and then see if you can grab it with your paws too. Got it?"

Frostmask said, gazing out at the trapped kit.

Mallowkit made a soft noise of agreement, still holding as still as possible until the end of the branch was so close to her, it brushed her whiskers. Then she stretched forward, clamped the stick in her jaws and began to tug on it, struggling to use it to lever her front half out of the muck. Frostmask and Murmurstep added their weight to the other end of the branch along with Poolcloud's, keeping it as steady as possible.

"Good job! You're almost there!" Murmurstep purred encouragingly as Mallowkit wretched one foreleg out of the mud and grabbed at the end of the stick with all her might. "Just get one more paw on, and we'll pull you out!"

After few more moments of struggling, Mallowkit gave a final heave and yanked her other foreleg out, reaching for the branch. Her paw scrabbled against the bark as she fought against the slick mud to get a firm grip, but eventually her claws found purchase and sunk into the wood. Poolcloud gave a nod once he was satisfied with the strength of her grip.

"Hold on tight!" Poolcloud said.

Poolcloud bent his head to clench the end of the stick in his jaws, and Murmurstep and Frostmask did the same. With three cats pulling on the branch, it took only one hard tug to dislodge Mallowkit. She was freed from the mud with a loud squelch and then quickly towed back onto solid ground before the puddle could pull her in again.

Her paws shaking, Mallowkit let go of the branch and stood on unsteady legs. She looked almost more like a tiny porcupine than a kitten, with her pelt so thoroughly stained brown and stuck up in muddy tufts all over her body.

"Th- Thank you," Mallowkit stammered, her eyes still wide and frightened.

Murmurstep bent her head and gave Mallowkit a firm lick on her forehead to soothe her.

"You're okay," Murmurstep said briskly before wrinkling her nose up. "Although I have no idea how Amberberry is going to get all this mud off of you."

"You scared her and the whole clan," Poolcloud added, putting on his stern 'dad voice.' "You both know that you're not allowed to leave camp."

Mallowkit and Marigoldkit bent their heads. Frostmask suspected that the situation had shaken them up enough that neither had the spirit left to argue.

"Are we going to be in trouble?" Marigoldkit asked, lifting huge eyes to stare up at Frostmask. "Are you not going to let us become apprentices?

Frostmask blinked, as for the first time, she realized that some of the kits' apprehension might be stemming from the fact that she, the deputy, was here to fetch them. They were very familiar with Poolcloud, the father of their den-mates, and Murmurstep, their older sister, but they probably only knew Frostmask as an authority figure.

"You won't be apprentices for another couple moons either way," Frostmask pointed out gently. "But, I'll leave your punishment to your parents to decide."

Privately though, she figured that the kits had gotten a big enough scare here that no more punishment would be necessary.

"Let's head back to camp," Frostmask said, turning and leading the way home.

The kits obediently trailed after her with Murmurstep and Poolcloud flanking them to make sure neither fell behind or wandered off.

As they drew closer to the camp, Frostmask's ears jerked up as she picked up the sounds of numerous voices and the faint scent of blood and fox.

Pelt bristling slightly, Frostmask put on a small burst of speed to

dash ahead, pushing her way through the tunnel quickly and ignoring the aberrant thorns that tugged at her fur.

When she emerged into the camp clearing, she relaxed quickly upon seeing Autumnleap and Pineshade, who were talking to a group of clan-mates and seemed no worse for wear than a few scratches. Nobody looked overly distressed either. There was definitely some agitation in the fidgeting of her clan-mates' tails, but no one was on the verge of panic.

"You're alright," Frostmask purred with relief as she trotted up to Autumnleap and Pineshade. "Where's Lizardstrike and the others? And, the fox?"

Autumnleap gestured towards the medicine cat's den with a wave of his tail.

"They're a bit more beat up than us so Elmclaw is treating them first. But, everyone should be fine as long as their wounds don't get infected."

"As for the foxes, we chased the mange-pelts off," Pineshade broke in, baring her teeth. "They'll never come back to our territory, if they know what's good for them."

"Did you say fox*es?"* Frostmask clarified, her eyes widening.

Pineshade nodded.

"Yeah. There were two."

Frostmask shook her head, sighing.

We're even luckier than I thought that there were no bad injures.

Autumnleap blinked at Frostmask in concern, pulling her attention back to him.

"Did you find the kits?" he asked.

Frostmask nodded.

"They're fine. Just a bit shaken up," she said, glancing over her shoulder towards the rustling thorn barrier. "Here they come now."

Murmurstep entered into the camp first, Mallowkit and Marigoldkit hot on her heels and Poolcloud just behind them. As soon as the kits took their first steps back into camp, Amberberry let out a yowl of joy and rushed over to them from the nursery, leaving Minnowkit inside the den.

"Where were you?! What happened to you! Why are you filthy?" Amberberry demanded her rapid-fire questions in-between frantic licks to both kits' dirty pelts.

Frostmask drifted back over in their direction, wanting to make sure that that crisis was fully sorted before she went to check on the others who had battled with the fox.

"Mallowkit got stuck in some mud near the marsh," Poolcloud reported. "We got her out."

"I think they're fine, but you might have Elmclaw look them over to be sure," Frostmask added.

"Thank you. Thank you all!" Amberberry's eyes welled with emotion as she gazed up at Frostmask, Murmurstep, and Poolcloud from where she crouched over her kits. "I don't know what I would've done if I lost them."

Frostmask dipped her head in response to the queen's gratitude before she glanced over at the kits.

"No more sneaking out though, alright?" she said.

Mallowkit and Marigoldkit just nodded meekly in response.

"Say thank you to Frostmask, Poolcloud, and Murmurstep for rescuing you," Amberberry prompted. "Then we are going right back to the nursery. Minnowkit will be so happy to see you; she's been so worried too."

"Thank you," Marigoldkit and Mallowkit murmured, staring up at them.

Poolcloud's gaze softened.

"I'll see you later you little scamps," he said.

Murmurstep just purred, rubbing her cheek first against Marigoldkit and then Mallowkit. Frostmask nodded at them, and Amberberry begun to herd them away.

"I'm going to go check on the patrol that fought the fox now," Frostmask said to Poolcloud and Murmurstep.

Murmurstep blinked at her.

"They're okay?" she asked, her gaze drifting off of Frostmask to stare behind her, where Pineshade and Autumnleap were still chatting with Redclaw, Weaseltail, and some others.

"I think so. But, I need to get a full report," Frostmask said from over her shoulder as she trotted off to the medicine cat's den, leaving Murmurstep and Poolcloud behind.

When Frostmask reached the lichen curtain that sheltered the den, the ever-pervasive floral scent of herbs drifted out of the cave, along with the scents of Elmclaw, Lizardstrike, Cedarfur, Hollowshade, and Yewstorm as well as Snakeeyes and Rowanheart.

She was just about to step inside when she had to jerk back as she almost ran smack into Cedarfur as he was coming out.

"Er— hi," Cedarfur meowed, his ears twisting back in a look that was almost apprehensive.

Frostmask's gaze flickered over his body, taking in his injures. He had cuts all over his pelt, but it seemed like his tail had gotten the worst of it. Although most of it was already bandaged with cobwebs, Frostmask could still tell that there were big chunks of fur missing.

The foxes must have really chewed on it.

"Are you alright?" Frostmask asked, lifting her gaze to meet his eyes.

"You mean my tail?" Cedarfur asked, glancing back at it. "Yeah. Or, it's still all there, if that's what you're asking. Should still be functional too. Elmclaw said I was lucky nothing was broken. It might look pretty raggedy for a while though."

Frostmask nodded. She was genuinely relieved that he was okay, but as her fear for her clan-mates' safety faded, some annoyance that they'd ended up in a fight with the foxes, despite her orders contrary, grew to replace it.

"And, what happened with the foxes?" Frostmask asked.

I told you not to engage.

"We ran into them on our way to the ThunderClan border," Cedarfur said. "Two of them. A pair of mates, I think. They just ambushed us. We had no choice but to fight."

"Alright," Frostmask said, her brow furrowing. "I'm glad you all ended up okay. And, the foxes are gone now, correct?"

Cedarfur nodded.

"When the other patrol arrived, they chased them away," he said.

"Good. That's good," Frostmask said with a tired sigh. "Well... rest up."

Cedarfur nodded at her, his pelt prickling awkwardly as he slunk away, leaving Frostmask to finally reach the medicine cat's den, calling out a greeting as she stuck her head inside.

Elmclaw was right near the entrance, wrapping a cobweb bandage around one of Hollowshade's hind-legs, but he glanced up at Frostmask's appearance.

"You're not hurt too?" he asked, his dark brow furrowing.

"No," Frostmask said, stepping further into the cave. "I'm just here to check on everyone. Although Pineshade and Autumnleap still need their scratches looked at. Oh, and you should look at Mallowkit too. We found her and Marigoldkit. They're okay, I think, but a little

shaken up."

Elmclaw gave a low grunt of annoyance, making him sound unsettlingly like Darkpelt.

"I don't know what's gotten into everyone today. Kits and warriors stirring up trouble. Getting into fights with foxes! As if I don't have better ways to spend my time," he grumbled to Frostmask, going back to working on Hollowshade's leg before raising his voice to address all the cats in the den. "In that case, some other cats better get out of my cave because this is the medicine cat's den, not Fourtrees. It's getting *way* too crowded in here."

"Rowanheart and I can leave," Snakeeyes volunteered, rising to her paws.

Frostmask glanced over at where she had been sitting with her mate and Lizardstrike.

Snakeeyes and Rowanheart, like Autumnleap and Pineshade, only seemed a bit scraped up, but Frostmask's belly lurched in worry as her gaze finally made it over to Lizardstrike, and she saw the amount of herbs and cobwebs plastered to him.

Although Lizardstrike's ears flattened like a chastised kit's as Frostmask hurried over to him, he still purred in greeting.

'Are you gonna say 'I told you so?" Lizardstrike asked with a wry twitch of his whiskers once she reached his side and started sniffing at his wounds.

Frostmask ignored him as she assessed his injuries. The worst one seemed to be a nasty bite to his flank, although Elmclaw had packed that tightly with herbs, so hopefully it wouldn't get infected. Frostmask shook her head, giving a soft sigh. At least it looked like Lizardstrike, like the others in his patrol, had made it out of the fight without severe injuries, even if they hadn't heeded her warning.

But, Frostmask still gasped when Lizardstrike's ears pricked back up, revealing that one of them had been badly torn. Only the lower

half of his right ear remained, a jagged wound marking the area where the top had been ripped off.

Lizardstrike lifted his paw and gently touched it to the injured ear once he noticed her staring.

'It's not like I was using it anyway,' he signed with a sheepish glance.

Frostmask just sighed again, deeply weary.

'What happened? Cedarfur told me you were ambushed?'

'We didn't do anything!' Lizardstrike clarified quickly, his gaze flashing. *'We were just heading towards the ThunderClan border, and they were there. I didn't scent them coming because of the thunderpath. Like you said.'*

'Two foxes versus four cats. Not great odds,' Frostmask signed, shaking her head. *'You all got very lucky Yewstorm got backup so fast.'*

Lizardstrike's lip curled back in a toothy grin.

'Luck had nothing to do with it. You should've seen me fight. Those foxes got their tails handed to them.'

Frostmask rolled her eyes, but she couldn't keep from purring with fondness. Lizardstrike may have lost part of his ear, but at least his cocky attitude was still intact.

'I'm going to go check on the others now. Feel better soon. And, listen to Elmclaw,' Frostmask signed.

Lizardstrike huffed in exasperation, rolling his eyes.

'Yes, Mom.'

Frostmask gave him an admonishing flick of her tail against his nose before turning to Hollowshade, who Elmclaw had now finished tending to.

"You're okay?" she asked her.

"Just a bite on a leg," Hollowshade reported with a dismissive shrug. "Elmclaw said I should be fine to go back to warriors' duties in a couple days as long as it doesn't get infected."

Frostmask nodded, turning finally to Yewstorm, who was the deepest in the den. She padded over to him, and Yewstorm glanced up at her from where he was lying in a nest. His green gaze flashed with nervousness as she reached him.

"You did well getting back to camp so fast," she purred. "It sounds like the others would have been in a lot more trouble if you hadn't."

"Yeah." Yewstorm said, fidgeting. "But, I'm sorry about this whole thing."

Frostmask blinked, her brow knitting in confusion.

"Sorry about what?"

Now it was Yewstorm's turn to blink in surprise before his ears twisted back in concern.

"Uh... did Lizardstrike not tell you?" Yewstorm meowed hesitantly, his voice a bit hushed.

The fur on the back of Frostmask's neck started to prickle.

"Tell me what?" she pressed, a disquieting feeling crawling up her spine.

Yewstorm's shoulders hunched in consternation.

"Um... that we went after the foxes on purpose. I *really* tried to talk them out of it, I promise. But, Cedarfur was set on figuring out where they were denning..."

Frostmask whirled around and started stomping back towards Lizardstrike's nest before Yewstorm had even finished talking, hot anger already burning in her belly.

Not only had they disobeyed her, but Lizardstrike and Cedarfur had lied so boldly to her face about what had really happened. How

could they have done that? Cedarfur, well, maybe she could understand. But, *Lizardstrike?*

Lizardstrike had curled up, his eyes shut, so she prodded an uninjured section of his flank, her tail flicking in impatience as she waited for him to stir.

As soon as Lizardstrike's eyes opened, Frostmask began signing.

'Why didn't you tell me that Cedarfur sought out the foxes?! Did you help him?'

Lizardstrike jolted upwards into a seated position, wincing as he jostled his wounded side, but that didn't slow him down as he began to respond.

'Don't be mad! He was just trying to help.'

*'By doing the **exact opposite** of what I asked?'* Frostmask's lips curled back in a snarl. *'I'm the deputy! You all are supposed to listen to me. And, you lied to me for him?'*

'We didn't mean to fight them!' Lizardstrike protested. *'Cedarfur just wanted to know where they lived so we had something to report back about. The foxes have been lurking around for a while. They were going to cause trouble sooner rather than later. Cedarfur just wanted to stop that before it could happen.'*

Frostmask just growled in response, her tail lashing behind her. Lizardstrike gazed at her with large blue eyes.

'Don't punish him, please. The foxes really did ambush us once we got close to their den. We weren't trying to fight them, I swear.'

Frostmask grumbled to herself, her ears flicking with annoyance.

If I don't punish him, then the other warriors will think they can walk all over me... right?

But, Lizardstrike was staring at her so imploringly. Would punishing Cedarfur only isolate him more, pushing him further to Dampfang, and alienating Lizardstrike from her as well? He did just lie to her

for the sake of his friend...

Frostmask sighed unhappily, a faint headache coming on.

'Okay... I won't this time. But, don't let something like this happen again, alright?' Frostmask signed, wrestling down the urge to continue lecturing him.

Lizardstrike nodded emphatically, giving a grateful blink and purr.

Frostmask meowed goodbyes to the cats in the den as she trudged out of the cave, her tail still twitching with excess agitation and her paws dragging with frustration and exhaustion.

She could still hardly believe that Lizardstrike had lied to her so blatantly. They were close, weren't they? So why had he done it? Did he not trust her to be fair to Cedarfur? Or was it just a frog-brained decision— a temporary lapse in judgement?

Frostmask shook her head, trying to dislodge the thoughts as she emerged back into camp, trepidation heavy in her belly as she braced herself for more crises.

But, she found none— the camp was peaceful. The drama of the late afternoon seemed to have drained everyone's energy, not just Frostmask's, and so, despite the fact that it was now sunset, the time when ShadowClan should be the most active, her clan-mates lounged around camp.

Frostmask glanced around, reluctant to actually believe that everything had really been sorted out. But, the fresh-kill pile was still high and would last them through the rest of the day, so there was no issue there. She could see Cedarfur sitting and talking with his father Dustleap, but she'd just promised Lizardstrike not to punish him, so he was off the hook... at least this time. Although, the ThunderClan border still hadn't been patrolled since Cedarfur's patrol never actually made it over there...

A brief blaze of rebelliousness flashed in her chest.

You know what? Screw it. ThunderClan isn't going to invade just because we missed one day's sunset patrol.

Then that only left one problem for her to deal with... Where was Sedgestar?

But, even that question was answered when the thorn barrier rustled, and Sedgestar and Emberflower came padding through. A look of mild surprise flitted over Sedgestar's face as he noticed the cobwebs that peppered a few of his clan-mates' pelts, contrasted with the relaxed attitude of the camp. Frostmask made a beeline over to the leader and his mate, wanting to report to Sedgestar before he approached anyone else or returned to his den.

"Frostmask," Sedgestar said in greeting. "It looks like it's been an eventful afternoon."

Frostmask swallowed back a huff of dry, humorless laughter.

"You don't know the half of it."

She then launched into explaining the sequence of the day— from Dampfang preempting her assignments to take out a weirdly large border patrol, to the fox attack, to rescuing the missing kits. Sedgestar's and Emberflower's eyes stretched wider as each new detail was revealed. The only thing Frostmask left out was the fact that Cedarfur had decided to search for the foxes deliberately. If she was going to stay true to her promise to Lizardstrike about that, she couldn't rat Cedarfur out to their leader.

Once Frostmask reached the end of the day's events, she took a moment to inhale a deep breath and give Sedgestar and Emberflower a beat to process all of the information.

"Where have you been?" she asked finally.

Sedgestar shifted his weight from paw to paw.

"Emberflower and I went out to visit Grovepelt's grave and take a walk around the forest," he said in a low voice. "But, I would have returned as quickly as I could if I had known all that was going on."

Sedgestar perked up slightly as he glanced at her approvingly.

"Although, it sounds as if you handled all of this quite well."

Frostmask's ears twitched, flicking off his praise like she would a stray water droplet.

No, I sent the patrol of young warriors out in the first place, and then when I heard about the foxes, I froze up. Pineshade had to prompt me to send out the patrol to drive them off. And, Murmurstep was the one who tracked down the kits. Then Lizardstrike lied to me since his patrol actually went after the foxes on purpose.

"It was tough. I wish you'd been here," Frostmask muttered, scuffing one of her paws over the ground in front of her and feeling infuriatingly a lot like a young apprentice with a mountain of responsibilities and tasks that went far above her head. "I went to your den, but you weren't there."

Sedgestar sighed.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to help too," he said, his tail-tip flicking. "And, I'm sorry for being more absent recently. Grovepelt may have... But, that doesn't excuse me leaving the Clan to fend for itself."

Sedgestar gently touched his tail-tip to her shoulder.

"But, you did a good job," he insisted. "Our clan-mates are all safe. That's what truly matters."

Emberflower nodded in agreement, giving Frostmask a supportive purr. Frostmask blinked uncertainly. She still wasn't sure if she was worthy of the praise, but she also didn't have the energy left to argue, so she just dipped her head instead.

"Thank you, Sedgestar," she said.

Sedgestar started to pad away.

"Go take a break. You deserve it," he added from over his shoulder.

Frostmask nodded, tiredness dragging at her pelt. There was nothing she'd like more to do than just that and take a nice, long nap. But, after only a heartbeat of fantasizing about curling up in her soft nest, Frostmask blinked in dismay as she recalled one final

unfinished task.

Someone still has to make new nests in the nursery.

Sighing loudly to herself, Frostmask plodded towards the den.

Shifting Alliances

The deep green shadowed Fourtrees' clearing was edged with silver beneath the light of the half-moon, and the hums of cicadas and chirps of crickets rang in Frostmask's ears as she strode towards her and Paledusk's usual meeting spot. Her journey over there had been pleasantly uneventful.

Frostmask's tail twitched with indecision as she slunk through a patch of lush bracken.

Maybe it's not such a bad thing that Cedarfur went after the foxes... If they were still here, traveling alone would have been risky.

But, if the foxes had still been lurking around, Frostmask wasn't sure if that would've been enough to deter her. Even though it felt as if she grew more exhausted and stressed by the day as her duties piled up, she had been looking forward to this meeting with Paledusk. Since ShadowClan had missed the previous gathering, he would be her only source of news from the other clans for this moon. And, Frostmask was sure Paledusk must be equally as eager to hear her news, albeit to know why ShadowClan had not attended the previous gathering.

And, it's nice to get away from the Clan for a bit. Frostmask admitted to herself, her ears flattening. *I don't have to be 'the deputy' if it's just me and Paledusk.*

She spotted Paledusk now, waiting for her under the shade cast by some dense ferns. Even in the dark, his white fur caught her eye quickly. His pelt was as immaculately groomed as always, and he sat with his thick-furred tail wrapped neatly around his paws. Frostmask lifted her tail in greeting, and he dipped his head, his eyes bright as she padded up to him.

"I'm very glad to see you," Paledusk purred. "I feared the worst when ShadowClan was absent from the gathering. Are you doing well? Is your clan alright?"

"I'm fine," Frostmask said, taking a seat next to him. "ShadowClan is too. Well..." She glanced away for a moment. "Mostly. Grovepelt died shortly prior to the gathering. The Clan was still grieving him, so that's why we missed it."

Frostmask's gaze made it back over in time to see Paledusk blink, and Frostmask couldn't help but wonder if he realized that by 'the Clan,' she really meant Sedgestar.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Paledusk rumbled. "Everyone who ever met Grovepelt knew that he was a noble warrior. He will be missed."

Frostmask nodded, some grief for the old deputy twinging in her chest in echo of Paledusk's words.

"All of ShadowClan must feel his absence," Paledusk continued, his brow furrowed. "Although I suspect that Sedgestar will most severely."

Frostmask dipped her head in agreement.

"They were like kin," she murmured. "I think Sedgestar feels a bit lost without him."

"It's normal to feel adrift after the loss of an old friend. Especially one that you've known since kithood." Paledusk tipped his head to the side in contemplation. "It can be oddly freeing though too."

Frostmask's brows arched in surprise. Every death she'd experienced so far had felt like another weight of burden upon her back. She'd never dream of calling the experience 'freeing.'

"How so?" she asked hesitantly.

"Most close relationships are anchoring," Paledusk explained with a thoughtful blink. "In them there is safety and familiarity, and without that anchor you may find yourself in a new, frightening place. Strangeness is scary, yes. But, it can also bring opportunity. You may find things there that you never would have encountered before."

Frostmask mulled this over for a moment, unsure of how to

respond. She still did not feel totally convinced by his way of thinking, but it seemed rude to just flat-out disagree.

"It sounds like you're speaking from experience," she commented finally.

Paledusk gave a soft, melancholic purr.

"Yes, you're quite right," he said, turning to gaze out into the shadowed trunks of the forest in the distance. "I remembering feeling similarly once I lost my brother. We'd been inseparable before, and of course I grieved his loss. But, it was only once he was gone that I was able to grow closer to my other clan-mates, since my time was no longer so focused on just him."

Frostmask's eyes narrowed uncertainly.

"But, wouldn't you have preferred him to have still been alive?" she prodded.

"Of course," Paledusk responded, glancing over at her again as his eyes widened with emphasis. "I don't mean to sound callous. But, tragedies that we have no control over will happen, whether we want them to or not. The most we can hope for is try to make the best of them."

"I suppose that's true," Frostmask conceded finally. "Sometimes though, it's just hard to move on."

Paledusk nodded solemnly.

"Of course it is. Especially when the wound is still so fresh." He paused for a moment. "I just hope that ShadowClan is not so consumed by their grief that they can't see this as a kind of... fresh start."

Paledusk blinked at her, his green gaze intent.

"That *you* can't see this as a fresh start."

Frostmask's tail curled around herself as she fidgeted a bit defensively under the heat of his gaze.

"...What do you mean?" she asked.

"All I mean is that it may be easier now for you to inspire respect from your clan-mates as deputy," Paledusk said smoothly. "After all, Grovepelt is no longer here for them to look to and wish for him to still be deputy instead."

"But, I don't want to replace Grovepelt," Frostmask protested, her brow furrowing. "He did so much for ShadowClan and for Sedgestar."

"Of course," Paledusk said with a soothing blink. "You wouldn't be 'replacing' him. But, although Grovepelt was a noble warrior, he was also a member of the old guard. Those cats tend to be... stuck in their ways. But, you are youthful and full of fresh, good ideas. You will be able to guide ShadowClan towards a brighter future. You will be able to prove yourself as a good leader in your own right."

Frostmask relaxed slightly. Pineshade had said something similar about now being Frostmask's chance to prove herself. Frostmask had thought that the best thing to do would be to try to keep things as much the same as possible while ShadowClan was going through such a turbulent time. But, if both Pineshade and Paledusk were encouraging her to assert herself... maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"Perhaps," she said. "Although I still miss Grovepelt."

"It's not mutually exclusive. It is possible to grieve for him and still want to do the best by your Clan at the same time," Paledusk pointed out, angling a single ear towards her. "You can miss him while still working to make ShadowClan stronger. Or, would you prefer to grieve helplessly?"

Paledusk's words sent Frostmask's mind drifting to Sedgestar's all-consuming grief and how it had crippled him, and therefore, the Clan. Her tail flicked uneasily against her side. Sedgestar had seemed a bit more interested in the going-ons of the Clan since the fox incident, but he still wasn't back to the leader that she'd known before. Or would he never fully recover? After all, things couldn't

exactly go back to the way they used to be— Grovepelt was dead, and there was no changing that. Maybe this was the new normal, even if Sedgestar's distance put more pressure on Frostmask and the rest of the Clan.

Then Paledusk must be right— surely it would be better if they could somehow use the unfortunate situation of Grovepelt's death to drive them to help ShadowClan, rather than bringing more harm to it. It would even be what Grovepelt would've wanted, right?

"No, I wouldn't. And you're right... it probably would be better for ShadowClan if my clan-mates respected me a bit more," Frostmask admitted.

Frostmask glanced away from Paledusk, her ears folding down with embarrassment as her thoughts shifted to the recent incident with the fox attack. Although Sedgestar's absence had contributed to the situation, it wasn't the only source of the problems that day. If only Dampfang hadn't taken so many warriors out on patrol, if only Cedarfur hadn't gone after the foxes on purpose, if only cats had *listened* to her, the whole situation would have been a lot less precarious. It was true that everything had ended up alright in the end, but what if it hadn't? What if the warriors she'd sent weren't enough to drive off the foxes because Dampfang had taken out too many others? Well, the foxes probably wouldn't have even attacked in the first place if Cedarfur hadn't tracked them down, disobeying her... And, then Lizardstrike wouldn't have been forced to lie to her to cover for him.

Frostmask exhaled a quiet sigh through her nose.

"But, I don't know how to make them respect me," she said. "Sometimes it feels impossible."

"Just put your head down, work hard, and be diligent," Paledusk urged, his intent tone drawing her eyes back to him. "Give them nothing to complain about."

"They'll *find* something to complain about," Frostmask pointed out drily.

Paledusk's gaze shimmered in a faint hint of amusement.

"Then tell them they're being unreasonable."

Frostmask tilted her head, considering.

"Still, easier said than done," she meowed, huffing another sigh. "But, okay. I'll keep working at it."

Paledusk gave her a single, approving nod.

"You'll succeed with time," he said confidently, but then his gaze abruptly darkened. "Although, I fear that ShadowClan may not have much of that at the moment."

Frostmask stiffened at his rapid, grim shift in tone, her stomach flipping with worry.

"Why? What do you mean?" she asked, her paw-pads suddenly damp with perspiration.

"I have something important to share. News from the gathering," Paledusk said soberly. "The other clans are still displeased about Sedgestar appointing you to deputy, and I think they saw ShadowClan's conspicuous absence from the following gathering as another slight. I'm afraid that ShadowClan may have even lost its closest ally."

Frostmask's ears jerked up in consternation.

"ThunderClan? Really?!" she asked.

Paledusk nodded, his expression grave.

As Frostmask's surprise faded, her ears went from pricked and alert to flat against her skull as her worry grew.

"But... Acornear had been so nice to me last gathering. And—and Morningstar... he doesn't seem like that kind of cat. Right?"

"Morningstar has always been a bit weak-willed," Paledusk said, a subtle sneer creeping across his features. "I don't know if you're too

young to recall, but he almost let ThunderClan starve to death the leaf-bare you were born. All because he wouldn't fight WindClan to stop them from stealing his prey."

Frostmask gave a small nod.

"No, I remember," she said in a soft voice.

"I'm afraid he's fallen prey to the other leaders' influence again," Paledusk growled, his muscles stiffening. "I heard Willowstar whispering in his ear, convincing him that he's allowed ThunderClan to become Sedgestar's play-thing— yanked around at the ShadowClan leader's whim. Morningstar didn't announce anything publicly, but after the gathering ended, I heard him with my own ears speaking with Rabbitstar, Fennelstar, and Willowstar, condemning Sedgestar and ShadowClan."

Frostmask's blood chilled.

Morningstar didn't speak out in defense of ShadowClan at the previous gathering either, after the other clans dogpiled on us. Has ThunderClan really betrayed ShadowClan? After we've done so much for them?

Frostmask's tail twitched uncertainly.

Although I'm not sure if I could call it a 'betrayal' since I know we no longer are within the time frame of our initial alliance. And, truthfully Sedgestar ***has*** *manipulated Morningstar on occasion... But, ShadowClan cats have also died for ThunderClan! And, I guess I just assumed that ThunderClan would stay on our side after all the battles we fought together.*

Paledusk met Frostmask's gaze, his eyes sharp and bright like two small, green suns.

"There may be trouble coming for ShadowClan. And, sooner rather than later. They want to punish Sedgestar for 'acting as if he's above StarClan.'"

Anxiety tensed Frostmask's muscles to knots, making her claws unsheathe and dig into the ground. If Paledusk was right and ThunderClan had truly turned against them, then ShadowClan

could be in grave danger.

*We would stand no chance against all **four** other clans!*

Frostmask ducked her head down, her stomach twisted up so tight, she felt sick.

And, this is all my fault for being deputy! Should I resign? Or will that just make ShadowClan look even weaker, and be more of target? Oh StarClan, is this really happening!?

Paledusk's tail brushed against her side, rescuing her from the whirlpool of silent panic that was threatening to pull her in. He lowered his head so they could meet eye-to-eye. Instead of burning like the sun, his gaze was round and soft now, glinting in the moonlight, and Frostmask surfaced enough from her anxiety to feel shame at the fact that he'd seen her starting to break down.

"Don't get too worried yet," Paledusk soothed, his voice low. "I think there is a solution. There may be a new ally for ShadowClan."

"W—Who?" Frostmask rasped, forcing in a deep breath and sitting up slightly.

Paledusk's gaze never left hers.

"SkyClan."

Frostmask blinked, her brow furrowing.

"But, Fennelstar is one of the leaders that hates Sedgestar," she said, her tail twitching.

"Yes, but Fennelstar is old and his illness is worsening," Paledusk said, his brow knitting in concern for his leader, but only for a moment. "Everyday, he entrusts more and more of the duties of running the Clan to me. He is well aware of the fact that, possibly very soon, he may pass on to StarClan, and I will be SkyClan's leader. If I advise for SkyClan to make a new alliance, Fennelstar will heed it."

Frostmask's tail still flipped with worry, thumping against the

ground.

"But, SkyClan and ShadowClan have been at war for seasons now. Can our clans really put that behind them? Would you really convince your clan-mates to fight for ShadowClan just to help... *me?"*

"Although of course I want to help you, this is so much bigger than just you or I," Paledusk rumbled, his eyes smoldering with conviction. "This is about making a statement, showing that traditions aren't always the right way, even if they are the way that it has always been done. There will be other rogue-born clan cats, or other half-clan cats in the future— that's inevitable. Should they face the same struggles and prejudice as you have? Should they be rejected— disallowed from becoming deputy or leader just because of the circumstances of their births?"

Paledusk lifted his chin and straightened his spine, rising above Frostmask's eye-level once more.

"Not only would an alliance between SkyClan and ShadowClan simply bring benefits to our two clans, it could have a lasting impact on the forest and the nature of the clans themselves," he said, puffing out his chest slightly.

Frostmask blinked in surprise. The vision Paledusk was proposing seemed grand and noble, sure, but also near impossible.

"But, the clans are so stuck in their ways," Frostmask muttered, glancing down at her paws. "Even if SkyClan and ShadowClan joined forces, will that make any sort of real difference? Didn't you even once tell me that it's impossible to change the clans' minds?"

"That was then. Winds are changing, Frostmask. You must sense that," Paledusk said, his voice oddly hollow as if his mind was far from here.

Frostmask lifted her eyes back towards him, and she saw his contemplative gaze was pointed upwards, towards the stars.

"The others can see it too. That's why the other leaders are all abuzz

about Sedgestar appointing you deputy," he continued. "Sedgestar took the first step towards change by doing that. But, the others want to stick to the old ways, and so they will fight, fang and claw, to keep it that way. It will be easy for them to stop it if they move quickly— kill it before it grows too strong. Because they know that even a single droplet can turn into a flood..."

Paledusk's eyes dropped, finding hers again.

"And, we can help it along," he rumbled in a low voice.

Frostmask couldn't hold the intensity of his gaze, so she looked away, fidgeting slightly as Paledusk continued.

"The other clans will want to move fast. That means that we have to be even faster. ShadowClan and SkyClan would have to strike first —"

"But, I'm worried that my clan-mates won't want SkyClan's help," she admitted, flashing a glance back over to him.

Paledusk's brow furrowed slightly at the interruption, but he shook it off with a twitch of his ears, refocusing his attention on her.

"Now may be one of your best chances at changing their minds," Paledusk said. "Your influence in your clan is growing. Plus, SkyClan and ShadowClan's tallies against each other are about even. These 'tit-for-tat' battles can't go on indefinitely, right?"

"But, ShadowClan cats are proud. It will be a sour herb for them to swallow to accept SkyClan's help after so many moons of hostility." Frostmask argued, flexing her claws anxiously.

"ShadowClan may not have any other options," Paledusk pointed out.

Frostmask dipped her head at Paledusk's foreboding implication.

*He's right. ShadowClan will **need** a new ally.*

"That's true," she muttered. "But, it would be better for everyone if they accepted an alliance willingly, and not because we are backed

into a corner... But, I don't even know where to start with convincing them."

"Start small. Gauge interest carefully and be discreet about it," Paledusk said, his eyes flashing in the moonlight. "Time is of the essence, but it would be even worse to push too hard too quickly and lose them entirely. Although, you may be surprised at your clan-mates pliability to the matter. After all, you have friends in SkyClan— myself and Larchtail, right? Some of your clan-mates may have friendly relations with other SkyClanners as well, in which case it could be easier to convince them."

"They may view me as traitorous for even suggesting it though," Frostmask said, a soft growl entering in her voice as an image of Dampfang formed in her mind. "There are some who still question my loyalty to ShadowClan entirely."

"But, your role as deputy is to be involved in the leading of your clan, and your clan's relationship to the others. There is no way around the fact that you will be involved in inter-clan politics," Paledusk pointed out with a dismissive flick of his tail.

Frostmask sighed, her whiskers drooping.

"Yeah. You're right. I guess I just don't see this as winning me any favors with my clan-mates," she muttered.

Paledusk's whiskers twitched with bitter humor.

"Just wait until ThunderClan is growling at your borders. I think your clan-mates will be a lot more grateful for this proposed new alliance then."

Frostmask's neck fur prickled.

"You really think ThunderClan will start provoking ShadowClan?" she said in a rasping whisper.

The edges of Paledusk's lips curled down in a slight frown.

"I fear it may be even worse than that. ThunderClan may even attack ShadowClan outright. As I said earlier, the other Clans will

want to move quickly to nip this at the bud. ThunderClan also almost certainly believes that they have the element of surprise, as well as the numbers on you at the moment, thanks to the other clans' support. They would have no reason to delay."

"Then, even if we did have an alliance, what could we do to stop it?" Frostmask asked, her stomach twisting. "You were saying just... strike first?"

Paledusk gave a single nod.

"Precisely," he said in low tones. "We need to prove that ShadowClan is not weak, if we want to have any chance of preempting a bloodier war. SkyClan and ShadowClan flank ThunderClan. Together, we could potentially land a devastating attack, teaching ThunderClan, and the other Clans too, that we are not to be trifled with."

Paledusk's tufted ears angled back, his fur rising slightly with urgency.

"But, we would need to make our move soon. Before they can," he said, an ominous edge to his words.

"Soon? How soon?" Frostmask fretted, her claws flexing in and out again. "ThunderClan hasn't done anything yet. Plus, it will take me some time to try to convince my clan-mates, and the next gathering is only a quarter of a moon away. Do you think they will attack before then?"

Paledusk shifted uncertainly.

"Waiting until the gathering may be fine. But, I worry chances of attack will rise with every passing sunrise," he warned.

Frostmask nodded, although her pelt crawled with apprehension.

But, what else is there to do? We can't attack ThunderClan without any solid proof that they pose a danger. Paledusk's word is the only evidence I have on it right now, and I can't even share that with my clan-mates! They can't know that Paledusk and I've been meeting.

At least if we wait until the gathering, ShadowClan can see for ourselves if ThunderClan has turned hostile.

"Perhaps you and I should speak again sooner, and we can share any new information then," Paledusk continued, pulling Frostmask from her thoughts. "How about we meet on the night of the waning half-moon this time? It will allow us to discuss shortly after the gathering and see if an alliance should be put into effect."

Frostmask dipped her head.

"That sounds reasonable," she agreed.

Paledusk nodded.

"It's settled then." He rose to his paws. "Sorry to cut our meeting short, but I need to get going soon. Do let me know how things develop with your clan-mates about the alliance."

"I will," Frostmask said, rising to her feet as well.

Anxiety still whirled like a storm in her chest, but she did her best to shove it down. She wasn't even sure what aspect caused her greater strife— the fact that ThunderClan may have turned on ShadowClan, or that she may need to convince her clan-mates to accept an alliance with SkyClan to protect them. That would definitely require some very delicate maneuvering, which Frostmask wasn't certain if she was cut out for. She was no expert at politics like Sedgestar or Paledusk. All she knew was, one paw-step out of place, and Dampfang would surely be at her throat, accusing her of treason.

Frostmask's brow furrowed deeply.

Or maybe it's Sedgestar who will turn on me. He's the one that knows I have kin in SkyClan, and he's already done it once before...

Frostmask gave her head a small shake, attempting to dislodge the grim thoughts.

*Maybe I shouldn't do **anything** right now, except for keep an eye out. After all, Paledusk could have misunderstood. Maybe ThunderClan isn't*

actually angry at ShadowClan at all. Maybe Morningstar had just been pretending in front of the other Clan leaders, to get them off his back.

Frostmask clung to that idea, every inch of her wanting it to be true.

Yes, I'll wait. All will be more clear after the next gathering. And, besides, we can't attack ThunderClan if they've done nothing yet.

"Goodbye. And, good luck." Paledusk said, blinking at her solemnly.

Frostmask echoed his goodbye a bit absentmindedly, her focus still on her thoughts. As Paledusk trotted off, Frostmask turned away from him, heading back towards ShadowClan territory.

Moving as quickly as she could while still remaining as quiet as possible, Frostmask prowled over the thin strip of ThunderClan land between Fourtrees and the thunderpath, her ears pricked as she listened for any approaching monsters or other cats. But, the world around her was dead quiet— it seemed like even the insects had gone to sleep.

On swift paws, she dashed across the dark stone, releasing a sharp breath once she reached the other side.

Trying to still the anxious hammering of her heart, Frostmask inhaled slowly, but she froze as she caught a strong scent. She lifted her muzzle towards the breeze, the deep, nutty odor of ThunderClan settling in her nose.

...Did the ThunderClan scent here seem more powerful than normal? Was it just wind-blown scent markers, or had a ThunderClan cat actually wandered so close to ShadowClan territory? Even possibly *crossed* the thunderpath?

Each one of Frostmask's hairs bristled out when a sudden rustling from the undergrowth on the other side of the thunderpath filled the air. Cold fear gushed through her, winding her muscles up.

Was someone following her? Had they seen her cross the thunderpath? She couldn't be caught here. If Paledusk was right about the fraying alliance between ThunderClan and ShadowClan,

then a patrol finding the deputy of ShadowClan lurking so close to their borders would damage the potentially already fraught relationship even further.

Not waiting to see who or what emerged from the bushes on the ThunderClan side of the thunderpath, Frostmask instead whirled around and fled into the darkness of the pines.

Unexpected Arrivals

Frostmask was convinced that the only thing stopping her from imminent implosion was the thin, but immensely strong thread of unabating anxiety that spanned across her entire body. It held her together— tethering paws to legs, pelt to skin, ears to head— without it, she'd just collapse into nothingness as the pressure finally broke her.

As it was though, she was still standing despite her recent string of sleeplessness and the newly ever-present tension in her head. Ever since her meeting with Paledusk, she couldn't dislodge fears about the other clans, and ThunderClan especially, from her mind.

Needing an outlet for the anxious energy, Frostmask's tail began to fidget.

It was just so unfair— as if her normal life of being deputy wasn't hard enough, now she had to worry about ShadowClan's very existence as well? And, there was her anxiety about who had been following her that night when she had left Paledusk to contend with too. Frostmask *knew* something was there. But, who? A clan-mate who'd finally questioned her occasional solo 'night-hunts?' But, no one had said anything to her so far. If she'd been caught, then why wait to confront her? Then had it been a ThunderClan cat? The next gathering was only a night away, would they demand what ShadowClan's deputy had been doing on their territory then?

Although, if there was one good thing that'd come out out these past few days, it was the fact that somehow Dampfang hadn't undermined her at all during them. Not once had he sent out a conflicting patrol or given out contrary orders. Frostmask wasn't so naive to think that it was because he'd given up— rather she figured that it was because she just hadn't given him the chance. Her anxiety fueled her, and she found herself sending out patrols on a strict schedule, and demanding an equally stringent regular report for every patrol down the border.

Frostmask's whiskers twitched in a flash of bitter humor.

At least I've finally found the key to becoming a good deputy: Existential fear for ShadowClan.

Frostmask huffed miserably and lifted a paw to her face to begin grooming it. The activity would at least offer some distraction from her unhappy thoughts.

It was nearing moonhigh, and most of ShadowClan were starting to turn in for the night. Patrols were returning, and cats lounged around camp with their loved ones, sharing meals or talking before they went to their nests.

But, as her clan-mates relaxed, Frostmask waited impatiently by the thorn barrier for the border patrols to return. She needed to know their reports before she could even consider sleeping. The borders had all been quiet so far, but Frostmask couldn't help but feeling like a storm was brewing.

Frostmask's ears pricked as the thorn bushes rustled. Weaseltail entered camp first, and Frostmask caught his eye quickly as the rest of his patrol scattered.

"Everything fine on the WindClan border?" she asked.

Weaseltail's long tail swished through the air.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, although we did run into a WindClan patrol."

Frostmask tensed.

"Was there a confrontation?" she asked, nervousness swirling in her stomach.

"No fighting," Weaseltail said before he hesitated for a moment, his eyes softening slightly as he stared at her. "...There was a bit of the usual jeering, but nothing we couldn't handle."

Frostmask's pelt itched like there were ants crawling all over her. She knew from Weaseltail's hesitation before answering that

WindClan's insults must have been about her— ShadowClan's rogue-born, StarClan-forsaken deputy. Paledusk must be right then, at least about WindClan— they still had it out for ShadowClan.

"Thank you for the report," Frostmask murmured.

Weaseltail hesitated a moment longer before gently touching his tail-tip to her shoulder in a brief, comforting gesture. Then he padded off, joining Redclaw for a meal, while Frostmask resumed her sentry position, waiting for the ThunderClan border patrol to return.

Thankfully, it wasn't long until that patrol also arrived with Thornheart at its head. Frostmask gestured him over, but even as he padded towards her, Frostmask's eyes drifted towards one of the cats who entered camp behind him.

Lizardstrike hadn't seemed to have noticed her. His attention was fixated entirely on Cedarfur, who entered camp next to him. As Lizardstrike purred in response to something Cedarfur signed, Frostmask's eyes skimmed over Lizardstrike's ears, lingering on the one he torn while helping Cedarfur in his frog-brained scheme. Cedarfur's dark tabby tail flicked mischievously, and his fur there was still patchy too—not yet completely grown back after the foxes ripped it up.

I suppose I should just try to be happy none of them were badly hurt. Frostmask reminded herself for what felt like the hundredth time.

But, that thought didn't stop her from still feeling a sting of betrayal as Lizardstrike padded away with Cedarfur at his side.

Frostmask refocused her attention on Thornheart as he stopped in front of her, and her ears pricked up in surprise to see that Murmurstep had joined her former mentor to give the report too.

Frostmask's claws slid out with worry. If two cats wanted to speak to her, something must be wrong.

"Did something happen?" Frostmask asked quickly. "Did you run into ThunderClan?"

Thornheart and Murmurstep exchanged an uneasy look.

"Not exactly," Thornheart said. "But, we did notice something weird. ThunderClan's scent-markers today were strong... *Really* strong."

"It was like they marked every tree and bush on their border," Murmurstep added, her ears twisting back anxiously. "The reek of the thunderpath didn't even cover it up at all."

Frostmask's brow furrowed, her unease growing.

"I can't imagine the message they're trying to send to be anything but aggressive," she muttered.

Thornheart nodded in grim agreement.

"My thoughts exactly," he growled.

"Should we report to Sedgestar about this?" Murmurstep asked, her tail flicking.

"Yes... Yes. Please do," Frostmask said.

Thornheart and Murmurstep departed from her with a swift nod of farewell and immediately headed towards Sedgestar's den.

Frostmask stared after them unseeingly, her focus turning inward on her growing anxiety.

Paledusk was right. ThunderClan ***is*** *growing hostile towards us.*

...What do I do now? Is it time to bring up the idea of an alliance with SkyClan?

Her pelt bristled out, muscles tensing.

Although this is just the first sign of trouble... should I wait longer until ThunderClan actually does something. Or, is it better to strike before they expect it?

"Frostmask."

"Frostmask?"

"Frostmask!"

Frostmask jerked out of her thoughts, her gaze snapping to the side. Autumnleap stood there, his expression equal parts bemused and worried at he gazed at her.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" Frostmask asked, blinking at him rapidly.

Autumnleap's amber eyes softened.

"It's not important," he said, waving whatever it was off with a swish of his tail. "Are you okay? You've seemed kind of out of it lately."

Frostmask's ears flattened with uncertainty.

Of course she couldn't tell him about the things she learned from Paledusk, but she couldn't blatantly lie to him either— he'd clearly noticed that she was stressed.

"I'm um... fine. It's just the usual deputy stuff," she said, her tail flicking. "And, I just received reports about a bit of trouble on the WindClan and ThunderClan borders. There wasn't any physical fighting... but it seems like neither are too pleased with us right now."

"ThunderClan, really?" Autumnleap gave a blink of surprise. "Huh... well I'm sure whatever's got their tail in a twist will blow over soon. And, WindClanners always act like we put a hornet in their nest while they were sleeping, so there's nothing new there."

Frostmask nodded, but she was only half-listening to him. Her anxious thoughts still clambered for her attention, and a part of her wanted to get back to her brooding so she could figure out her plan to protect ShadowClan from the growing threats of their neighbors.

But, Autumnleap was still standing in front of her.

"Do you want to go to sleep?" he asked. "Or have you eaten yet? We could share a mouse."

"I'm okay," Frostmask murmured, glancing away from him. "Go on without me. I need to plan some... uh *deputy things* before I go to the nest tonight."

Autumnleap's brow furrowed.

"Are you sure it can't wait until the morning?" he coaxed.

Frostmask shook her head. "I won't be able to sleep anyway, unless I do this. My thoughts will keep me awake."

"But, you could at least *try* to relax for a bit," Autumnleap said.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as some irritation began to nettle her.

"I can't. Not right now," she responded, shooting a look back over at him.

Autumnleap was quiet, and for a moment Frostmask thought that she'd gotten through to him, and he'd do as she asked and leave her be for now. But, then Autumnleap lifted his tail, his gaze resolutely meeting hers.

"Okay. If you don't want to sleep, then I'm getting you out of camp," Autumnleap declared, starting to push her towards the thorn tunnel with a few hard nudges of his muzzle.

Frostmask swallowed back an irritable hiss and dodged away from his insistent nudges.

"I told you," she said, lifting her chin. "I'm *fine.* Just let me do this, then I'll go to the nest later."

"But, you're so *not* fine!" Autumnleap protested, his stubborn gaze unwavering. "You look two heartbeats away from pulling all your fur out. Just take a break for the night!"

"How's that supposed to help?" Frostmask snapped, her back starting to arch defensively. "I'm stressed because of all the things I need to, but you want me to *slack off?* You see the contradiction, right?"

"Deputies deserve to relax sometimes too," Autumnleap said matter-of-factly.

"Autumnleap," Frostmask warned, her tension headache growing.

"Frostmask," Autumnleap echoed, setting his jaw in that obstinate way which made him look a lot like Redclaw and Pineshade.

Frostmask sighed, closing her eyes for several moments.

"...You're not going to give up until I agree to go with you." she said.

"Yep!" Autumnleap responded, his tone much too irritatingly cheerful.

Frostmask opened her eyes again to shoot him the most withering glare she could manage.

"Remind me again why I like you?" she asked.

Autumnleap purred, and, despite herself, the sound drained some tension from Frostmask's body.

"I dunno. You're a frog-brain?" he asked, his eyes shimmering.

"Probably," Frostmask grumbled, but there was no real bite in her tone.

Autumnleap purred louder, and she joined in.

Frostmask found the way that he always seemed able to weasel a laugh out of her, no matter how much she wanted to cling to her bad mood, equal parts charming and unbearably annoying. But, she supposed that those contradictions were partly why she enjoyed his presence so much— it at least meant she was never bored around him.

"Fine. We can leave camp," she decided.

Autumnleap's tail lifted victoriously, but Frostmask continued before he could relish in it.

"But we aren't slacking off. Let's patrol down the ThunderClan border."

Autumnleap's nose crinkled up.

"Border patrol?" he echoed. "Is whatever happened today really so bad? ThunderClan is still ShadowClan's friend, right? Can't we at least go for a hunt instead?"

Frostmask's stomach fluttered nervously at the mention of ThunderClan's friendship with ShadowClan.

At least, I certainly hope they're still our friend.

"No. Border patrol," Frostmask meowed firmly. "ThunderClan strongly marked their border today for some reason. I want to check it out. Plus, ThunderClan might be our allies but SkyClan and RiverClan are certainly not, and if either of them are invading, they'd be coming from that direction."

Autumnleap sighed.

"Why do you have to be so smart and dutiful all the time?" he lamented.

Frostmask purred.

"Come on, frog-brain," she meowed affectionately, flicking her tail against his flank and leading them to the thorn barrier.

Their journey to the ThunderClan border passed uneventfully as Frostmask and Autumnleap chatted about nothing in particular. Talking with Autumnleap did relax her a bit, but Frostmask's stress still remained ever-present around her like the humid, green-leaf air — sticky against her skin, clumping in her fur, and warning of rain, or even a coming storm. But, when Frostmask glanced towards the sky, the stars of Silverpelt twinkled down unobstructed, not a cloud in sight.

Rain must be coming though. I wonder if it will disrupt the gathering tomorrow?

Frostmask couldn't tell if that would be a good thing or a bad thing. Maybe it would be nice to put off any potential confrontation with the other clans for even longer, but that could also mean that tensions would just continue to grow if there was no outlet for release.

The scent of the thunderpath and ShadowClan's and ThunderClan's scent-markers warned them that they were reaching the border. Immediately, Frostmask could identify what Thornheart and Murmurstep had alerted her about. The overwhelming ThunderClan scent slammed into her like a wall, rushing into her nose. Frostmask gave her head a small shake, trying to clear her nostrils of the musty odor of leaf-mold and acorns.

"Okay, you weren't kidding about ThunderClan's border marking," Autumnleap said, the bridge of his nose crinkling up. "Did they have the entire clan out here, marking the border?"

Frostmask's tail started to swish from side to side at a swift, agitated pace as unease crawled through her fur.

"I don't know," Frostmask muttered. "This is all very strange."

Autumnleap grunted in agreement, following Frostmask as she turned towards her left and began to trail along the edge of the thunderpath. They were near the edge of the border closest to Fourtrees, but did the ThunderClan scent also extend all the way down to the edge of clan territory?

They hadn't walked for long before Frostmask's nose twitched again as she picked up a new scent— rabbit blood. Her brow furrowing with concern, Frostmask followed the scent, soon catching glimpses of splatters nearby and some tufts of fur scattered about as well. Her pelt prickling with suspicion at the prey killed so close to the border, Frostmask lowered her head towards the fur, trying to see if she could pick up any scents of ThunderClan cats. But, it was so near to the strong scent-markers and the confounding scents of the thunderpath, it was impossible for her to tease apart anything concrete.

"What do you think happened here?" Frostmask muttered to

Autumnleap, nodding at the scraps of rabbit fur and blood. "I don't recall any hunting patrols going out to this area today."

Autumnleap's ears flicked thoughtfully.

"Hm... the rabbit was killed by a monster and a scavenger carried it off?" he suggested, but he sounded a but uncertain. "You don't think it was ThunderClan... do you?"

"I don't know what to think," Frostmask admitted, flexing her claws uneasily. "Let's keep going down the border, but keep an eye out for anything else suspicious."

Autumnleap nodded in agreement, and they continued on. This time, they walked for quite a while without anything else stopping them. The ThunderClan scent-markers stayed strong, but there was no more signs of potential prey-stealing at least, or any indications of trespassing.

It was growing quite late into the night by the time that Frostmask and Autumnleap had nearly reached the edge of ShadowClan territory. Frostmask opened her mouth, about to suggest that they return home, but before she could say anything, a distinctly iron tang settled on her tongue. Frostmask stopped walking, fear rippling through her pelt and lifting the hair on her shoulders.

"Do you smell that?" she hissed in a low voice.

Autumnleap froze at her serious tone, opening his jaws to drink in the air.

"Blood. Cat blood," he whispered in confirmation, his eyes widening. "And a lot of it. What do we do? Do we go back to camp for help?"

"No. What if a clan-mate's in trouble?" Frostmask asked, her tail flicking urgently. "We should go investigate, and then one of us can run back if needed."

Autumnleap nodded, grim determination lighting in his eyes. Frostmask leading the way, the two of them sprinted through the dark trees, as silent as owls in flight. The scent kept them close to

the thunderpath, leading them down their border, continuing towards the edge of clan land.

A jolt of nervousness gripped Frostmask's chest as sharp as talons, and she flashed a glance over her shoulder just to reassure herself that Autumnleap was still safe and with her.

Are we under attack? Could SkyClan or RiverClan have snuck around the outside edge of ThunderClan territory to invade? Or, has ThunderClan really turned on us?

There was no yowls or cries of pain, but Frostmask couldn't tell if that was a good sign of not. She squashed down her rising fear and focused back on tracking the scent of blood, which was growing stronger and stronger in her nose with every passing heartbeat.

Then her ears jerked up at the sound of a faint cry.

At first, she thought it was a whine of pain, but as the high-pitched squeak rang through the forest again, she realized it was the mewling of a kitten. Her fear took on an edge of confusion.

What's a kit doing all the way out here? Is it hurt?!

Frostmask shot another worried look over her shoulder, and Autumnleap gazed back at her, his brow furrowed, looking equally as concerned. The fear of invasion immediately forgotten, all of Frostmask's attention shifted to finding the kit.

Luckily for them, the kit seemed to have no desire to remain hidden, and it mewled sadly over and over again. It was a desperate, incessant cry, which only drove Frostmask forward faster, her ears pricked and swiveling in a frantic attempt to locate the distressed kitten. As they followed its cries, the scent of blood grew more powerful. It was almost overwhelming by the time they padded up to the thunderpath, the scent and the cries coming from directly ahead of them.

Frostmask hesitated as her paws crossed ShadowClan's scent-markers and reached the smelly, oily grass that bordered the thunderpath, but there was no denying the fact that the cries and

the scent of blood were coming from the other side.

Frostmask stared into the foreign territory.

"That's still ThunderClan land," Autumnleap muttered, his tail swishing worriedly.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked, her eyes sliding over to him.

Autumnleap looked uncertain, casting a glance from side to side as if checking to see if anyone else was around.

"The blood scent is strong, and that kit needs help. We can't just do nothing," Autumnleap said finally, turning his gaze back to her.

Frostmask nodded.

"I was thinking the same thing. Let's cross."

After a quick check that there were no monsters coming, the pair dashed across the thunderpath as fast as they could.

When they reached ThunderClan's scent-markers on the other side Frostmask's neck fur bristled. But, her unease was not from trespassing on another Clan's land— rather it was from the feeling of a tacky substance coating her pads and sticking between her toes. She lifted a foot and found the bottom of her paw stained dark. The metallic tang of blood, along with the foul stench of the thunderpath mixed together in her nostrils, making her stomach slosh nauseatingly and bile rise in the back of her throat. Autumnleap was also inspecting his stained paws as Frostmask cast a look back behind them towards the thunderpath. The moonlight illuminated the setting enough that she could just barely make out the large, shadowy smear across the black stone.

Frostmask wiped her paws against the grass, trying to scrub off the blood. But, the resumed squeaking of the kit yanked Frostmask's attention away from her paws. The cries were much clearer now. Hardly paying attention to Autumnleap's low murmur of warning, she pushed through the undergrowth, deeper into ThunderClan territory. Only a few fox-lengths away from the thunderpath, she

found the source of the crying nestled in a small patch of ferns.

There were two tiny kits; eyes closed, ears still folded. They couldn't be more than a few sunrises old at the most.

It was a dark tortoiseshell kit that'd been crying, but she quieted quickly as Frostmask lowered her head and gave her and the other kit a sniff. The tortoiseshell wiggled in the direction Frostmask's warmth, but her grey-furred brother at her side was still. Frostmask's stomach started to sink.

Is he... dead?

Frostmask gently touched her muzzle to the other kit's side, expecting the worse, but she inhaled sharply as the kitten twitched, still clinging to life.

"StarClan," Autumnleap whispered, peering down over her shoulder at the kittens with wide eyes.

"We need to help them," Frostmask muttered urgently, curling herself around the kits. "Kits this young can't stay warm on their own."

The little tortoiseshell seemed to finally realize that Frostmask's scent wasn't familiar, and, as Frostmask's fur enveloped her, she let out an indignant squeak, quickly followed by a tiny little hiss, her toothless mouth and bright pink tongue flashing dramatically.

Frostmask would have found her attempt at a fierce protest adorable, if her brother wasn't so worryingly still.

Frostmask focused all her attention on him— if the tortoiseshell was strong enough to cry and hiss, she was clearly in much better shape than her littermate. The grey kit didn't even mew as Frostmask drew him to her and began rapidly rasping her tongue down his side in an attempt to warm and rouse him.

"Where's their mother?" Autumnleap asked, gazing around at the surrounding area.

Frostmask shrugged, her mouth too full of kitten fur to respond.

Beyond the kittens being cold, they seemed to be in good shape— well groomed and at a good weight, so they couldn't have been left alone for long. But what mother would leave her kittens for long enough that they'd begin to get cold, and just sitting in a patch of ferns right next to a dangerous thunderpath, instead of safe in a cozy nest?

There were no clues in the air around them. The acrid fumes of the thunderpath and ThunderClan's scent-markers masked all the other scents, besides the odor of overwhelming blood of course. Although, thankfully, the kittens didn't have a drop on them. Autumnleap prowled forward warily, searching for the blood's source while Frostmask stayed with the kits. Her efforts on the grey kitten were starting to pay off, and now he began squirming, trying to escape her paws and letting out quiet mews as Frostmask kept grooming him. Once she felt like he was back to responding normally, Frostmask released a sigh of relief and loosened her grip on the kit, nudging him and his sister close together and wrapping her fluffy tail around them tightly to keep them warm and comfortable.

Autumnleap had disappeared into the surrounding bushes— the undergrowth was much thicker here than in ShadowClan territory— and Frostmask had lost sight of him. Frostmask's claws slid out warily. She didn't like being so boxed in, and on enemy territory. It felt as if in any moment, snarling ThunderClan warriors may burst out of the bracken.

"...Autumnleap?" she called softly.

Frostmask's ears jutted up in fear as she heard him inhale sharply. She sprung to her paws, although she was careful not to hurt the kits as she did so, and rushed towards his cry.

"What is it?" she gasped, pushing through some bracken.

She froze as Autumnleap's dark auburn pelt appeared through the undergrowth, and she saw that he was standing over the body of a bloodied grey and pale-ginger tortoiseshell cat. Frostmask grimaced as she caught glimpses of stark white bone and deep red viscera peeking out from the patches of drying blood on the cat's pelt.

She'd clearly been hit by a monster. The damage to her managed body was too great to have been inflicted by any normal animal, and behind her there was a trail of blood through the leaves, showing that she'd somehow managed to claw her way off the thunderpath before succumbing.

Autumnleap circled her slowly, checking for any signs of life, although Frostmask could tell even from several tail-lengths away that her wounds were far too gruesome for any cat to survive. Frostmask couldn't even imagine a leader with nine StarClan-given lives being able to come back from that. On the other side of her body, Autumnleap paused, and his ears flattened against his head.

"Oh no," he murmured. "There's another kit."

Frostmask moved towards him, starting to circle around to the other side of the dead queen. Frostmask caught a glimpse of tiny paws resting in a pool of blood near the she-cat's head, but then Autumnleap swiftly stepped forward, putting himself between her and the body, blocking her view of the kit.

"Don't look," Autumnleap whispered, his tone gentle but firm. "The kit didn't make it. They both were killed by the monster."

Frostmask blinked hard, her ears twisting back.

"...Oh," she said, her voice small.

Autumnleap draped his tail over her shoulders comfortingly, drawing her a few tail-lengths away from the dead cats.

"It looks like she was trying to move her kits across the thunderpath when the monster got her," Autumnleap said. "The blood is still wet, so I think it happened recently."

"She was coming from our territory? Is she a clan cat? Did you... recognize her face?" Frostmask asked.

Autumnleap shook his head.

"I've never seen her before, and she smells like the twoleg-place," he said.

A soft mew rang out in echo of him as the tortoiseshell kit began crying again. Frostmask turned back in the direction of the living kits and hurried to where she'd left them in the patch of ferns. When she reached them, she sat and wrapped her tail around them again, and this time she-kit quieted as if Frostmask's touch and scent was already becoming familiar to her.

"We should take them back to camp," Frostmask said, fixing her gaze on Autumnleap as he followed her over to them. "They'll die quickly without their mother, if a fox or an owl doesn't follow their crying and find them first."

Autumnleap nodded, but his ears twisted back to indicate the bodies behind him.

"What do we do with the queen and the other kit?" he asked in a quiet voice. "I mean... they aren't clan cats, so they don't need a death ceremony... But it feels wrong to just leave them here for the vultures. The bodies might also attract predators close to our territory... Dogs. Badgers."

Frostmask's attention was pulled away from Autumnleap and back to the kittens as they squirmed. They were becoming more active as they warmed up, and now they burrowed around in her fur as they searched for milk that wasn't there. Frostmask's heart twisted at the thought of scavengers feasting on the bodies of the kits' mother and littermate— no matter who the cats were, they deserved better than that. But, they couldn't afford to waste time digging a grave on ThunderClan's territory while these kits were left out here in the woods and so tiny and fragile.

"The living kits should take priority. We'll take them back to camp and then we'll ask Sedgestar if we should send a patrol to take care of the queen and the other kit," Frostmask muttered. "He may not want to since they are on ThunderClan land."

Autumnleap nodded, and Frostmask rose to her paws. Reluctant to part with the weaker tom-kit, she gently secured his scruff in her jaws, leaving Autumnleap to grab the tortoiseshell one.

After crossing the thunderpath again without issue, Frostmask and

Autumnleap ran in the direction of camp with their two new, little companions in tow.

Although they had a lot of distance to cover to get back to camp, they made relatively quick, uninterrupted progress. The kits were easy to carry— they were light-weight and had instinctively went limp and quiet once they were lifted up. Still though, Frostmask worried about them getting too cold and hungry, and so relief prickled at her when the camp's thorn barrier finally came into view. There they were greeted by Mosspounce on guard duty, and her eyes stretched as wide as moons as she noticed their cargo.

Frostmask carefully placed the kit she was holding down on her paws, freeing her mouth.

"Mosspounce, I need you to go get Sedgestar and tell him I need to speak with him," she ordered.

But, Mosspounce seemed too entranced by the kits to have heard her. She just stared at them, shock and delight in her expression.

"Holy StarClan... I didn't know you were pregnant, Frostmask!" she exclaimed.

Annoyance sparked off of Frostmask's pelt, which only got worse as Autumnleap started to purr loudly in amusement.

"What? No! Do you seriously think that I just gave birth out in the woods without even telling anyone I was expecting kits?" Frostmask demanded.

Mosspounce's tail flicked uncertainly, her head tilting to the side as she finally glanced up at Frostmask.

"Uh... judging by your tone, I guess not? But then where did the kits come from?" she asked, blinking in confusion.

Frostmask shook her head, exasperation rippling off her pelt in waves.

She liked Mosspounce, she really did. But, it was at moments like these when she understood why Swoopstrike had looked like he'd

wanted to tear out his own fur those times when Mosspounce had joined in with their training sessions.

"Stars, Mosspounce. Use your nose! We found them by the thunderpath. Now can you *please* go wake Sedgestar? Like *now?"*

Mosspounce sprung to her paws.

"Oh okay, wow! That's so exciting! Yeah, alright, I'll get him," she chirped, whirling around and dashing into camp.

Frostmask picked the kit back up and followed Mosspounce through the tunnel, careful to not let any of the thorns snag the kit's pelt. When she and Autumnleap entered into the camp clearing, they found it quiet; everyone else was asleep in their dens. Mosspounce hurried towards Sedgestar's den at the base of the Oak Tree while Frostmask and Autumnleap padded towards the nursery.

Frostmask left the kit she was responsible for by Autumnleap for a beat so she could stick her head inside the den.

"Dewleaf?" she called. "It's urgent."

In only a moment, Dewleaf's head was poking out of the den, blinking in the moonlight as Larkfoot peered out behind her. Dewleaf's eyes quickly found the tiny kits at Autumnleap's paws, and understanding dawned in her gaze.

"Bring them in," she murmured, retracting into the den.

Frostmask and Autumnleap entered to find everyone in the den awake, if not totally alert. Sprucekit, Fogkit, Lichenkit and Mudkit were stirring drowsily in a pile and gazing around, bleary and confused as their mother moved away from them, curling up on a different patch of moss to make room for the newborns to lay next to her instead. Amberberry and her older kits were blinking at Frostmask, Autumnleap, and the newborns with undisguised curiosity, while Larkfoot immediately began cooing over the orphaned kits as Autumnleap and Frostmask placed them near her and Dewleaf.

"We found them by the thunderpath. Their mother looks to be a

loner or a kittypet. She was killed by a monster," Autumnleap explained concisely.

Frostmask evidently had not done a good enough job cleaning the kits and warming them for Larkfoot's liking because she was already rasping her tongue down their tiny bodies, eliciting mewls of offense as she brushed their fur back the wrong way.

"Are they okay?" Frostmask asked Larkfoot anxiously. "The male was very still when we first found them. I think they got too cold and hungry."

"They seem a bit weak, but I think they'll pull through," Larkfoot reported between licks. "They're lucky you found them so quickly, the poor little dears. But, with a bit of food and love, I'm sure they will perk right up."

"Here, I can nurse them," Dewleaf said, trying to reach for the kits around Larkfoot.

But, Dewleaf huffed in exasperation as she still had to wait a few moments longer, until Larkfoot was done fussing over them, before the newborns were finally ushered to her side. Dewleaf bent her head to give them a sniff, and the little kittens smelled her right back. Just like when Frostmask had first found them, the she-kit recognized Dewleaf's scent as a stranger right away, and she let out a tiny, squeaky hiss. Her brother seemed more even tempered though, and instead of hissing, he squirmed closer to Dewleaf, enticed by the milk-scent radiating off of her. Despite her protests, his sister soon followed, and in only a few moments the two tiny kittens were snuggled into Dewleaf's belly fur, kneading and purring.

All the commotion had attracted the attention of Dewleaf's and Poolcloud's kits, who were now very much fully awake, and they scrambled over the moss to see what was going on. Lichenkit and Fogkit hung back a bit, with Fogkit ducking under Frostmask's tail to peer nervously over at the strangers. Mudkit and Sprucekit, however, strode fearlessly up to them, staring at the newborns with wide, wondering eyes.

"They're *so* small," Sprucekit said in a very loud whisper, prodding at the female kit with a light touch of her paw.

"Not that long ago, you were just as small," Dewleaf purred as Larkfoot swept Sprucekit and Mudkit back with a swish of her tail.

"Give the kits a bit of space, they've been through a lot already," Larkfoot said, gathering up the rest of the litter so they could curl against her flank while Dewleaf was preoccupied with the newborns.

The four kittens were still sleepy enough that they didn't protest, and they settled back down next to their grandmother's side.

"Are they going to stay here forever now?" Lichenkit asked as she eyed where the tiny kits lied next to Dewleaf— she seemed like she didn't love the idea of having to share her mother.

Larkfoot glanced over at Frostmask.

"I don't know. That depends on what Sedgestar decides," Larkfoot said.

A bit of worry stirred in Frostmask's belly. Her thoughts had been so consumed with getting the kits to safety and out of immediate danger, she hadn't yet properly considered what would happen to them long-term.

"What are their names?" Mudkit piped up with a yawn.

He rested his cheek down on Larkfoot's side, but his gaze remained transfixed on the new kittens.

"I don't know," Autumnleap answered this time. "They don't have any yet."

"Ooh! Can we name them?!" Sprucekit squeaked, her gaze lighting up with excitement.

"Maybe that's not such a good idea?" Amberberry spoke up, blinking nervously. "I mean, maybe we shouldn't get too attached yet. Like Larkfoot said, we don't know if Sedgestar will want to keep them."

The fur on Frostmask's scruff began to rise as a sudden flicker of anger appeared in her chest. But, a moment later, she forced her pelt back flat again. Amberberry didn't mean any harm, and the strength of Frostmask's reaction to her question was irrational. But, she couldn't help the fact that the thought of Sedgestar throwing out orphaned rogue kittens hit a little too close to home for her.

"All kittens deserve names," Larkfoot declared, gazing over at the newborns with the same amount of fondness that she showed for any clanborn kit. "They've had a rough start in life, and kittens this young can fade quickly. If they don't make it through the night, we can't doom their little spirits to a nameless eternity."

After a thoughtful pause, Amberberry nodded, easily convinced.

Dewleaf glanced over at Frostmask and Autumnleap.

"You two found them. You should name them," she said.

Frostmask's ears pricked up, surprise and uncertainty rushing through her.

"Us? Are you sure?" she asked.

"Well I'm not going to do it. I already used up all my favorite names with that bunch," Dewleaf purred, giving an affectionate nod towards her kits.

"Just go for it. Picking names isn't hard at all," Larkfoot said with an encouraging blink towards Frostmask and Autumnleap.

"If you want, you can use a theme. I like 'M' names," Amberberry supplied, her gaze lighting up as she got into it.

"Or, you can even just say the first thing that comes to mind," Larkfoot added.

Dewleaf released a dry huff of laughter.

"I'm touched you put so much thought into my name, Mother," she drawled.

"Oh hush!" Larkfoot flicked her tail against Dewleaf's side. "I'm only trying to help!"

Frostmask glanced over at Autumnleap, searching for his input. He inclined his head towards her, a bit of excitement sparkling in his eyes.

"You name the one you carried, and I name the one I did?" he asked.

"...Alright," Frostmask murmured.

Her gazed tracked over to the male kitten, and his smoky-grey pelt. He seemed much more alert that he'd did when she first found him, but worry that he would slip away still lingered in the back of Frostmask's mind. Either way though— if his life was doomed to be tragically short or not— he deserved to have a good name, and one that suited him. But what to pick? Choosing Lizardstrike's warrior name had been easy after Frostmask had taken moons to get to know him. But, Frostmask had only known this kitten for a tiny fraction of the night.

Okay, just do like Larkfoot said then. Don't overthink it.

As Frostmask's gaze skimmed over his grey pelt again, she was reminded of the color of the mist she often saw in the mornings that hung over ShadowClan's pines.

"I like 'Mist,'" Frostmask murmured, glancing towards the queens for approval. "Mistkit?"

"Excellent choice," Amberberry said with a nod as Dewleaf and Larkfoot echoed her with *mrrows* of support.

"I like it too," Autumnleap added with a purr before bending his head to take a closer look at the tortoiseshell kit.

He studied her closely, his brow furrowed with contemplation.

"Okay... now it's your turn," he muttered, his breath stirring the kit's fur.

He paused for a moment again, his ears flicking as he thought hard.

"The spots of orange on her back remind me of the way some salamanders look," Autumnleap said.

Dewleaf's nose crinkled slightly.

"Salamanderkit is a bit of a mouthful," she said.

"Yeah..." Autumnleap's voice trailed off for a moment, his brow furrowing. "Oh, I know! Then she can be Newtkit instead."

Autumnleap glanced over at Frostmask, searching for a reaction. Frostmask started to purr, and his gaze brightened.

Newtkit is another good name. It sounds very fitting for a ShadowClan cat... so does Mistkit actually.

Frostmask's gaze flickered over them both.

Like they belong here.

Dewleaf nodded.

"That works. Newtkit and Mistkit it is," she said, lowering her head to touch her nose to each as she said their names.

Newtkit mewed in offense again.

"Frostmask," Sedgestar's deep voice suddenly reverberated through the den, interrupting the moment.

Frostmask flicked her tail at the queens and Autumnleap in a hasty goodbye as she scrambled out of the nursery. She emerged back into camp to be greeted by Sedgestar and Emberflower, as well as Mosspounce lurking in the background behind them— not too subtly attempting to eavesdrop. Sedgestar beckoned Frostmask away from the nursery with an incline of his head, guiding her and Emberflower towards the foot of the Oak Tree so their voices wouldn't disturb anyone.

"Mosspounce tells me something about found kits?" Sedgestar asked,

before glancing over his shoulder back at Mosspounce, who's lurking had clearly not escaped his notice. "You may return to guarding the camp."

Her tail drooping in disappointment, Mosspounce trudged away.

"Yes," Frostmask said to Sedgestar and Emberflower. "We found two newborn kits next to the thunderpath. Their mother was nearby. And, dead. She'd been killed by a monster."

Sedgestar's brow furrowed.

"Who is their mother?"

Frostmask shook her head.

"I didn't recognize her. She smelled of the twoleg-place. My guess is a loner or rogue. But, a kittypet is also possible."

"And, she was found on our territory?" Sedgestar asked, the slight frown still on his features.

Frostmask uneasily shifted her weight from paw to paw.

"Er— ThunderClan's actually." As Sedgestar's amber eyes darkened with disapproval, Frostmask continued quickly, "Autumnleap and I could hear the kits crying and scented blood from across the thunderpath. We could tell something bad happened and made the decision to investigate."

"And, you made a good call. A predator could have easily gotten to those kittens before you did, if you waited," Emberflower said, blinking at Frostmask reassuringly.

Her green gaze slid over to her mate.

"You can't really have expected them to ignore distressed kits?" she prodded.

Sedgestar sighed through his nose, his eyes closing for a moment.

"I suppose not. But, I expect that you and Autumnleap didn't have

the chance to mask your scents prior to trespassing?" he asked, glancing over Frostmask.

Frostmask shook her head.

"I thought so." Sedgestar sighed again. "We will have to explain to Morningstar why his patrols will find ShadowClan scent on their land. I'm sure he wouldn't be pleased after so *thoroughly* marking the border today."

"He'll understand once he knows it was because kits were in danger," Emberflower said confidently before turning her attention back to Frostmask. "How are the kits? Do they need to see Elmclaw?"

"No. They were a bit weak when we found them, but Larkfoot seems optimistic. She said all they need is milk and warmth, not herbs," Frostmask said with a twitch of her ears.

"That's good to hear," Emberflower said, giving a relieved purr.

Frostmask glanced over at Sedgestar, searching his expression. He still hadn't said anything about the kits' fate.

"So... the kits... what should we do with them?" Frostmask asked hesitantly.

Sedgestar flicked his ears dismissively.

"What you've already done," he said. "If they don't need to see Elmclaw, then the queens will do a perfectly good job at caring for them for now."

"But, will you allow them to stay? Permanently?" Frostmask prompted, her pelt itching with anticipation.

Sedgestar was silent for a moment as he gave her a long look from the corners of his eyes.

"You know we will have clan-mates who will protest it if I do," Sedgestar responded, not quite answering her question.

Frostmask clenched her paws to stop her claws from sliding out as sudden anger smarted in her.

"Yeah, because letting rogue-borns into the clan is *so* horrible," Frostmask muttered bitterly, swallowing back a growl.

Sedgestar's sharp amber gaze darted over her, taking in every inch of her face and tense body.

"You know I don't agree with that," he said. "But, we need to choose our battles wisely. Sometimes compromises should be made in the pursuit of keeping peace within the clan. Tensions have already grown high enough."

Frostmask's ears pricked as she felt a small flash of surprise at his words. So Sedgestar did know about struggle for power that'd been happening in the clan— epitomized by the clash between her and Dampfang? She hadn't purposefully kept the information from Sedgestar, but she also didn't proactively bring *all* of the instances to his attention. Doing so felt like it would make her look too incompetent.

Sedgestar swept his gaze over Frostmask's surprised face and huffed in humorless amusement.

"Do you really think I'm so blind to the goings-on of my own clan?" he asked.

"No," Frostmask said, a touch defensively. "But, I thought maybe you've just been too distracted with Grovepelt's death to have noticed it all."

Sedgestar's lip twitched in the smallest of micro-expressions, and Frostmask immediately regretted clawing at that nerve. But, before she could think of the right thing to say to take the edge off her words, Sedgestar was speaking again.

"I have been distracted by Grovepelt's death for the past moon, and that's exactly why I'm putting in more effort now to make up for it," Sedgestar said cooly.

Frostmask stared down at her paws.

"I didn't mean—" she muttered.

Sedgestar held up his tail, signing for *'Silence,'* and Frostmask snapped her jaws shut.

"The gathering is only a day away. We need to prove that we are strong. Although, not only to the other clans, but to our own clan as well. Allowing outsiders into ShadowClan at this time may not give the right impression."

Frostmask's eyes narrowed, the anger and hurt in her chest only growing stronger, even as she tried to shove it back down.

"So, you'd throw out helpless kits?" she said in a low voice.

Sedgestar's tail began to twitch as his patience with her waned.

"Of course not," he said curtly. "The kits will be well cared for in the meanwhile. And, even if ShadowClan does not keep them, I will ensure that they will be safe wherever they end up. So, in answer to your question about if the kits can stay: I will think about it."

Sedgestar rose to his paws, arching his back in a deep stretch.

Sensing a looming dismissal, Frostmask quickly spoke up again.

"On a different topic, what do you think we should do about ThunderClan, after what Thornheart's patrol noticed today?" she asked.

"I think that's something I should speak with Morningstar about at the gathering," Sedgestar meowed. "I will explain more in a clan meeting tomorrow about it. Actually, perhaps it would be wise to explain the situation about the kits to the clan tomorrow as well and gauge their reaction before coming to a decision."

Sedgestar gave a nod to himself, thoughts flickering deep in his eyes.

"Yes..." he said. "We will discuss this and the matter of the gathering more then. For now, get some rest. Goodnight, Frostmask."

Frostmask dipped her head reluctantly.

"Goodnight," Frostmask muttered as Sedgestar and Emberflower turned and headed back to their earthen den.

Her tail twitched as she watched Sedgestar's striped coat vanish into the darkness of the tunnel. Frostmask couldn't help but feeling like she'd made things worse by letting her emotions get the better of her as she'd argued with him about the kits.

Maybe now he'll want to keep them less. He just thinks I'm being irrational and projecting.

Frostmask turned away from the den.

*But, I **am** projecting aren't I?*

She gave her ears a shake.

But, why does that mean that keeping them still isn't the right thing to do?

Frostmask awoke in the predawn after a short, fractured sleep. Too restless to remain in her nest, she rose to her feet, carefully stepping over Autumnleap as he continued to slumber, and padded into camp.

ShadowClan was just barely waking, and Frostmask found the clearing empty of everyone but Dustleap and Darkpelt— usual early-risers. Frostmask lifted her tail in greeting to them, but her first stop this morning was the nursery.

Anxiety stung at her paws as she approached the den. Had the orphaned kits made it through the rest of the night? Calling out a soft greeting, she stuck her head inside of the thorn bush. Larkfoot and Dewleaf had swapped litters again, and Dewleaf was back to sleeping next to her kits, the motley colored bunch piled up near her belly or thrown across her flanks, snoozing peacefully. Larkfoot had her tail curled around the much smaller newborns as they slept, but Larkfoot's eyes opened and her head lifted from the nest as Frostmask entered the den.

"They're doing well," Larkfoot purred in a quiet voice, sweeping her tail aside to beckon Frostmask over.

Frostmask dipped her muzzle down to give Newtkit and Mistkit a closer look. They seemed much more content than they'd been earlier, their tiny bodies loose and relaxed.

"Good," Frostmask murmured back with a purr. "Sedgestar will be making an announcement about them this morning."

Larkfoot nodded, wrapping her tail around the kits again. "I'll tell the others when they wake."

Frostmask nodded her thanks, returning back out into camp. In anticipation of the meeting, she made her way over to Clanrock, swallowing back a yawn. She waited there, and slowly more ShadowClan warriors trickled out into camp. Soon Sedgestar had also emerged from his den, Emberflower just behind him. Sedgestar headed right for Clanrock, giving Frostmask a nod of greeting as he passed her before springing onto the boulder.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath Clanrock for a clan meeting!"

Sedgestar's summon rang out through the camp, and in a matter of moments, all of their clan-mates were streaming into the clearing. Frostmask glanced towards the nursery to see Larkfoot and Amberberry emerge, but Dewleaf stayed inside, presumably to watch over the many litters of kits.

"I have a few important announcements today," Sedgestar said as his clan-mates settled in, his voice echoing through the clearing. "First is on the matter of ThunderClan's displays of aggression. I'm sure you've all heard by now about their overwhelming border marking yesterday."

Affirmative growls rumbled through the camp.

"And, after everything we've done for them!" Marshnose yowled out. "Those ungrateful fox-hearts."

"Should've known better than to ally with ThunderClan from the

get-go," Greytail growled from in front of the elders' den, her lashing tail stirring up dirt behind her. "Of course, as soon as we aren't fighting their battles for them, those self-righteous fools turn on us."

"I plan on confronting Morningstar about this at the gathering tonight," Sedgestar said over the grumbling, lifting his tail confidently. "Rest assured, this insult will not go unaddressed."

The grumbling quieted, although Frostmask knew that if Sedgestar's confrontation with Morningstar didn't go the way many of her clan-mates wished, their protests would be back.

"On a different topic, there is one other piece of news to share. Last night, Frostmask and Autumnleap came across a pair of orphaned kits just over the ThunderClan border," Sedgestar said. "Their mother is dead and appears to have been from the twoleg-place. Dewleaf is caring for the kits at the moment, but we need to determine a more permanent solution for them."

Frostmask's gaze skimmed over her clan-mates as she watched them exchange surprised and uncertain glances.

"Are you... thinking of keeping them?" Thornheart asked after a hesitation.

"I wish to know what my clan-mates think before making a final decision," Sedgestar answered.

"I think we should," Frostmask spoke up, wrapping her tail tightly around her paws for comfort as the eyes of the entire clan turned to her. "There's no one else to care for them."

"Frostmask is right," Redclaw called out, lifting her chin to project her voice across camp. "The kits have done nothing wrong. We'd have to be a clan of snakes to get rid of them."

"But, you said the kits were found on the ThunderClan side of the thunderpath!" Dampfang's voice suddenly rose up in protest, his brow furrowed as he stared up at Sedgestar. "The answer is obvious! I say they are *their* problem, not ours!"

A few cats muttered their agreement with him; Marshnose nodded along emphatically. Frostmask locked her gaze on Dampfang, her nervousness at speaking in front of the entire clan fading as she faced down her rival.

"But, they aren't *ThunderClan* kits!" she said, her fangs clenching with frustration. "It's as Sedgestar said— we found their mother's body, and she's clearly not a ThunderClan cat."

Dampfang ignored her, his eyes still on Sedgestar.

"Why should we waste resources just out of some kind of... misplaced sense of charity?" Dampfang demanded, his tail beginning to lash. "Let's take the kits to a ThunderClan queen, explain that we found them on their land, and tell them to deal with it. Or, better yet, drop the mewling bundles off at some twolegs' den. They aren't Clan cats anyway. Why give ThunderClan more potential warriors?"

"Why should we give away more potential warriors for ShadowClan?!" Frostmask said, leaping to her paws, her fur bristling as her outrage grew.

Sedgestar silently gazed down from the top of Clanrock, his eyes flickering from Dampfang to Frostmask as he weighed their arguments. Frostmask glanced up at him, making eye contact, and she was unable to hide the pleading in her expression. She almost hated how much she burned for this... and how vulnerable it made her to Sedgestar's mercy.

Although Frostmask of course felt for the kits, it was painfully clear that this wasn't just about them— it was also about Frostmask herself. Seasons ago, Sedgestar had faced a similar choice as the one before him now when Frostmask was left in ShadowClan. Back then, he'd chosen to help her, to take her in, but in the moons since he made that choice, had he come to regret it? Would he do the same over again if he could? He made her his deputy since then, sure, but undoubtably there were times when Sedgestar had considered whether or not he ultimately did the right thing in allowing her into his clan.

Although, Frostmask knew Sedgestar must be making other silent calculations too. He wasn't just judging Frostmask's and Dampfang's arguments, but also watching their other clan-mates, even the ones who didn't speak, and assessing their reactions just as closely.

Sedgestar blinked, the connection of their gazes breaking as his eyes slowly drifted from Frostmask and back to Dampfang.

"While I appreciate your concerns, Dampfang, I believe Frostmask is right. It is green-leaf, and prey is abundant. The value of having more warriors will outweigh the amount of resources the kits will use," Sedgestar said. "If Dewleaf approves, then they can stay."

Victory and relief flooded through Frostmask, making her paws shaky even as her tail curled in delight.

Dampfang, however, only looked more incredulous, his lip curling up in disgust as he glared at Sedgestar.

"You'd really force those— those *whelps* onto my sister?" Dampfang snarled.

Fierce, hot anger sparked in Frostmask's chest, but a new voice joined the discourse before she could respond.

"Dampfang!" Larkfoot said, her tone uncharacteristically sharp as she shot her son a glare. "They're just little kits!"

But, even Larkfoot's scolding wasn't enough to make Dampfang back down. He just gazed around camp, brazenly unrepentant as he searched his clan-mates' faces for support. Frostmask took a step towards Dampfang before he could find it, a soft growl rumbling in her throat.

"And, they need someone to care for them," Frostmask added on to Larkfoot's statement. "And, I'm sure that Dewleaf is more than capable of deciding whether or not to help herself."

This, finally, attracted Dampfang's attention. He directed his blistering gaze to hers, foul reproach in his eyes, and Frostmask heard his unspoken words as clearly as if he'd yowled them.

*It's bad enough that **you're** here. But, now there's more?!*

"But, does Dewleaf want to keep them permanently?" Dampfang asked, managing to tear his gaze away from Frostmask to sweep it over the camp again. "Has anyone even *asked* her if she wants them before we decide for her? She already has four others— are you really going to make her raise *six* kits? For six more moons, when her litter is already two moons old?"

Dampfang's words sent a wave of hesitance rippling through the clan. Frostmask swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry as she noticed a few of her clan-mates exchanging doubtful glances, and a soft, uncertain muttering rose up from the crowd.

"Six is a lot."

"Dewleaf shouldn't have to care for them if she doesn't want them."

"Maybe we should give them to ThunderClan."

Frostmask's pelt prickled, worry and urgency growing in her until she felt like she might burst.

"I want them."

Her words were ringing across camp before she had the chance to really consider them. But, they silenced the protests immediately, and the eyes of the clan turned to her. Frostmask lifted her chin, doing her best to fend off their alternatingly surprised, uncertain, and curious glances, but even Sedgestar seemed a bit startled at her declaration.

"Frostmask, are you sure?" he asked, his unreadable gaze flickering to her.

Frostmask gave a curt, confident nod, although her stomach churned with nervousness.

"Yes. I can't nurse them, but as long as Dewleaf agrees to feed them while they need milk, then I will be their primary caretaker," she said.

Frostmask's gaze traveled over the crowd until she found Autumnleap. His amber eyes were wide with surprise as they met hers, and Frostmask's heart twinged with regret for springing this on him without warning.

*I'm sorry we couldn't talk about this first... But, those kits **need** me.*

Autumnleap blinked, the surprise in his expression fading, and he gave her a small nod, as if he had understood her thoughts.

Larkfoot stuck her head inside the nursery for a moment, clearly conferring with her daughter. Only a heartbeat later, she emerged again.

"Dewleaf has agreed to this," Larkfoot announced.

"Is it really such a good idea for our *deputy* to take over the care of these kits?" Dampfang asked, a sneer plastered over his muzzle as he turned his gaze back to Frostmask. "Don't you have ShadowClan to care for? Duties to attend to?"

Frostmask's pelt bristled, and she opened her jaws to retort. But, before she could say anything, Marshnose was nodding in agreement with Dampfang.

"Somedays Frostmask hardly remembers to send out patrols on time," he complained. "Somehow I doubt her also having kits on her mind will help with her memory."

Marshnose waved a paw dismissively, his gaze flitting away from Frostmask as if she wasn't even worth his time.

"If she really wants to raise them, she can move to the nursery like a normal queen and some other cat can be deputy."

At the suggestion of a new deputy, a tense hush fell over the Clan, punctuated only by a few quiet mutters of agreement with Marshnose. Frostmask's chest tightened in a dismay that she tried to prevent from showing in her expression, but still Dampfang seemed to sense it. His gaze met hers, and he raised his chin, his eyes glowing as if he had just caught the biggest piece of prey in his life.

"I'll help her raise them," Autumnleap's voice suddenly rang out.

Frostmask's eyes flew to him, her belly fluttering as he rose to his paws, his auburn tail lifting high into the air. His amber eyes met hers steadily, and a twinkle of humor appeared in them.

"I mean, I can't nurse them either," he said drily. "But, I can care for them perfectly fine in all other ways when Frostmask is busy. Besides, both of us were the ones that found them and brought them here. It only seems fair that I help take responsibility for them too."

Dampfang turned his ire onto Autumnleap, his smug expression fading to be replaced with annoyance as his tail flicked behind him. His green eyes narrowed critically.

"You? Really? You'd even move to the nursery for them? Be responsible for them full time like a queen?" he demanded.

Autumnleap shrugged, his body-language relaxed, although Frostmask could see his animosity towards Dampfang glimmering dangerously in the depths of his eyes.

"Sure, if I need to. And, Larkfoot, Amberberry and Dewleaf are okay with it," Autumnleap said breezily. "Why do you sound so surprised, Dampfang? When we were apprentices, weren't you the one who was always saying that I take every excuse to goof off and get out of patrolling? Spending the day playing with kits sounds like the *perfect* job for me."

A spattering of purrs vibrated through the camp at Autumnleap's joke, dissolving the earlier tension. Frostmask gazed at him, her heart swelling with love and admiration.

"Very well then," Sedgestar broke in, nodding down at Frostmask and Autumnleap.

"Their names are Mistkit and Newtkit," Autumnleap added, his chest puffing out as if he'd already entered into the mindset of a proud father.

"You've already *named* them?" Dampfang hissed incredulously.

Not giving Autumnleap a chance to respond, Dampfang's gaze snapped back towards Sedgestar.

"And, what will we tell the other clans of this?" Dampfang snarled, his tail whipping furiously. "Things are already fraught enough thanks to Frostmask's appointment to deputy. You seriously think letting in more rogue-born outsiders will make things better?"

"Dampfang brings up a good point, Sedgestar," Marshnose said with a solemn nod. "Are these kits really worth the potential of provoking SkyClan into attacking? Or starting a war with WindClan? I was on a WindClan border patrol yesterday, and it's clear that they are still... displeased about Frostmask as deputy to put it mildly. They may see letting in more rogue-borns as a spit in their face, and that could push them over the edge."

Dampfang nodded along in vehement agreement, and Sedgestar hesitated, his tail-tip flicking indecisively.

Frostmask's stomach twisted with worry, but not just for the kits' fate. As much as agreeing with Dampfang nettled her, there was undeniable truth to his and Marshnose's concerns. There was a very real possibility that letting in Mistkit and Newtkit could spark conflict with the other clans.

"...We could say that the kits were born to me," Frostmask suggested hesitantly. "The timeline would work out— the kits are very young, and ShadowClan missed the last gathering, so know no one would have to know that I wasn't actually pregnant."

Paledusk would know.

Frostmask pushed the nagging thought away with a twitch of her ears. He would stay quiet if she asked him to. Letting outsiders into the clan didn't bother him, so why would he care that ShadowClan took in these kits?

"I'm still rogue-born myself, which would not do the kits any favors," Frostmask continued, her ears flattening. "But, at least in this case, they would have been born *in* ShadowClan, with a ShadowClan father." Her gaze flickered to Autumnleap briefly

before she lifted it back to Sedgestar. "That would surely pacify the other clans, at least a bit."

Sedgestar started to nod, his brow furrowed thoughtfully.

"That could work," he said slowly. "Frostmask, you would have to not attend this gathering, or else someone will notice that you do not have the milk-scent typical of a queen."

Frostmask dipped her head in agreement.

"And, everyone else— not a word of the kits' true parentage will be spoken outside of ShadowClan, understood?" Sedgestar asked, sweeping his gaze over the Clan.

"Then how will you explain Frostmask's and Autumnleap's trespassing in ThunderClan territory last night to Morningstar if they didn't go there to retrieve the kits?" Dampfang growled, his tail-tip twitching. "I doubt ThunderClan will appreciate it if you say that they stopped by just for fun."

Sedgestar lifted his chin.

"Autumnleap and Frostmask noticed significant amounts of blood-scent while on patrol, and worried that some cat was in mortal danger, they crossed the border to investigate. After finding the source to be a dead rogue queen, far beyond helping, they swiftly returned back to ShadowClan territory. End of story," Sedgestar said with such cool confidence that Frostmask couldn't imagine any cat hearing it and not being convinced that it was the full, honest truth. "If ThunderClan has not yet found the queen's body, they surely will sometime today, and it will corroborate our version of events."

Dampfang kneaded his claws angrily into the ground, but he seemed to have run out of arguments because he sat down heavily, simply giving a low growl in response.

"It seems it's all decided then," Sedgestar said with a nod, his gaze drifting back towards Frostmask. "Frostmask and Autumnleap will be responsible for the kits."

A few murmurs still whispered through the clan, but no one

protested as Dampfang had. Frostmask's gaze met with Autumnleap's again, and a jolt of equal parts anxiety and excitement crackled through her like electricity. But, the burst of energy was soon also tempered by a weight of doubt as the reality of the situation truly began to dawn on her. Just last night, Frostmask had been lamenting about the crushing amount of stress and responsibilities she had to deal with, and now she and Autumnleap were suddenly also responsible for the lives of two tiny, fragile cats...

Oh StarClan, what have I gotten us into?

Bonds

As the clan meeting broke up, Sedgestar named that cats who would attend the gathering tonight— Emberflower, Dustleap, Leafbreeze, Dampfang, Poolcloud, Autumnleap, Mosspounce, Cedarfur, Hollowshade, and Cricketsong— and Frostmask took advantage of her already gathered clan-mates to organize the morning's patrols. It was only after everything had been sorted, with border patrols given careful warnings to keep an eye out on both the ThunderClan and WindClan borders, that Frostmask was finally able to properly reflect on what had just happened. And, that meant speaking with Autumnleap, who had patiently waited for her as she finished her morning duties.

Although Autumnleap didn't look upset, Frostmask's stomach still twisted with nerves as she padded over to him. Autumnleap arched a brow.

"So...?" he began.

"I know," Frostmask said, bowing her head slightly. "It's a lot. And, all at once. But, I couldn't let them get rid of them."

Autumnleap's head tilted to the side.

"I know," he said simply. "I'm not mad about it... just a bit caught off guard. It'll be an adjustment, and I do wish we'd gotten the chance to talk about it beforehand. But, I think once everything settles in, I'll be excited."

Frostmask gazed up at him, her nervousness fading as instead gratitude stretched through her from nose to tail-tip.

"Thank you for speaking up like that," she murmured. "You didn't have to."

"I *did* have to, actually," Autumnleap said, his brow furrowing. "I wouldn't make you do this alone."

Frostmask blinked, her ears twisting back in confusion.

"But, they aren't really your kits," she said.

Autumnleap's whiskers twitched with dry amusement.

"Uh, did you hear Sedgestar? They *are* really my kits now," he said, his voice lightly teasing.

His amber gaze softened.

"They're really *your* kits now too," he added. "...I think we picked good names for them."

Warmth blossomed in Frostmask's chest and a purr rose her throat.

"I think so too," she murmured, delicately touching her nose to his. "Maybe we can talk more about this later? I think we should go see them now."

Autumnleap nodded sagely.

"Yes. Get properly introduced as their parents," he said, and despite his jokingly serious tone, a spark of genuine excitement appeared in his eyes.

They padded over to the nursery and entered inside after calling out a quick greeting to announce their presence. Amberberry was out in camp with her older litter and Larkfoot, but Dewleaf was still in the den with the rest of the kits.

"I was wondering when you two would show up," Dewleaf said, her grey tail looped loosely around Newtkit and Mistkit as they napped near her belly, while her kits played on the other side of the den, swatting and pouncing on each other.

But, as soon as Sprucekit spotted Frostmask and Autumnleap, she disengaged with wrestling with Fogkit and bounded over to them instead.

"Mom says that you're gonna be the parents of the new kits now!" Sprucekit said, her eyes round with excitement.

"Why do they get new parents?" Fogkit asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Yeah," Mudkit added as he trotted up to Frostmask and Autumnleap. "Will *we* get new parents now?"

Autumnleap's eyes crinkled in amusement as he ducked his head down to be eye-level with Mudkit.

"Do you *want* parents that aren't Dewleaf or Poolcloud?" he asked solemnly.

From across the den, Lichenkit's muzzle whipped around towards Autumnleap, her eyes round with outrage.

"No!" she broke in, giving a vehement stomp of her paw for emphasis.

An affectionate purr rose in Frostmask's throat. Despite Lichenkit's often seemingly aloof demeanor, no cat could argue the love she had for her parents.

Mudkit, though, was a bit more contemplative about Autumnleap's question, thinking over it for a moment, but he still shook his head.

"No," he chirped. "Just wondering."

"Then the good news is that you won't be getting new parents," Dewleaf said, her whiskers twitching in amusement. "You're stuck with me and Poolcloud forever."

"But, why do *they* need new parents?" Fogkit insisted, flicking his tail towards Mistkit and Newtkit, his irritation that no one had answered his question growing.

Frostmask's brow furrowed as the warmth in her chest dimmed.

"Newtkit and Mistkit don't... have other parents anymore," she began slowly.

When Frostmask was a young kit, death had been ever-present, shadowing her littermates and mother like an extra family member.

But, Poolcloud's and Dewleaf's kits had been born in new-leaf turning to green-leaf, when ShadowClan was strong and healthy. They had lived through Grovepelt's death, yes, but she wasn't sure if they had known him well enough for it to have made a lasting impression on them.

Lichenkit's, Sprucekit's, Fogkit's, and Mudkit's gazes all turned to her, their innocent eyes round with curiosity.

"Their mom is gone. Dead," Frostmask continued, her ears flattening as she did her best to explain what had happened as gently as possible. "And, we don't know where their dad is, or even who he is. Or if he's alive."

"Oh." Sprucekit's brow furrowed, and her tail drooped as her excitement faded. "...That's sad."

"It is," Dewleaf said in a soft voice as she gazed at her kit. "But, Mistkit and Newtkit have Frostmask and Autumnleap to take care of them now, and they will do a really good job. Don't you think?"

All four of the litter nodded hard, giving *mrrows* and purrs of agreement, and Frostmask's heart lightened. She felt oddly honored by the young kits' approval.

Dewleaf rose to her paws, delicately stepping over Newtkit and Mistkit, who both stirred faintly as the warm side that had been against them vanished.

"You two should spend some time with them," Dewleaf said, blinking at Frostmask and Autumnleap.

Frostmask nodded, moving around Dewleaf and drifting towards the kits seemingly without needing to tell her paws to move. It was like there was a physical pull between them and her, as natural as a pinecone tumbling to the earth when it was dislodged from a branch. Autumnleap however, lingered next to Dewleaf for a moment longer, looking uncharacteristically shy as he shifted from paw to paw.

"I'm not sure if you heard at the clan meeting," he began to Dewleaf,

his voice wavering a bit nervously. "But, I offered to help care for the kits a bit more when Frostmask is busy. Which might involve staying here in the nursery with them, overnight or something. I mean, I don't want to intrude into your, the queens', space if you don't want—"

"Oh Autumnleap, of course you can stay in the nursery!" Larkfoot's voice suddenly cut in as the senior queen's head poked into the den. "I mean, Amberberry and I helped bring you up! We all know you're a good lad, who's good with kits. And, I mean, Poolcloud practically lived in here when Dewleaf's kits were newborns anyway, so it would hardly seem fair to have allowed him to do that, while not allowing you to do the same."

Dewleaf nodded in agreement.

"Relax," she purred, touching her tail-tip to Autumnleap's shoulder reassuringly. "You're welcome here. And, I'm sure my litter will also be so happy to have you around more often."

That caught the kits' attention.

"Wait! What? Autumnleap is coming to live with us?!" Mudkit asked, rocking up and down on his toes as his brown-splotched pelt rippled with excitement.

"Yay!" Fogkit yowled, pouncing on Autumnleap's fluffy auburn tail and giving the tip a big chomp for emphasis.

Although Autumnleap winced as Fogkit thoroughly attacked his tail, he also purred loudly.

"Wonderful," he purred through a grimace. "I won't have any fur left on my tail when I leave."

Dewleaf gave a wry meow.

"You and me both," she said, rolling her eyes.

Sprucekit prodded at Dewleaf's side with a paw.

"Can Pineshade come too, with Frostmask and Autumnleap?" she

asked, gazing up at her mother with eager eyes.

"I don't think so. We shouldn't invite the *entire* warriors' den in here," Dewleaf answered, her whiskers twitching with dry amusement.

Sprucekit's face briefly fell with disappointment.

"Kits!" Larkfoot called. "Why don't you come on out and give Frostmask and Autumnleap some peace and quiet with the little ones for a bit?"

Dewleaf nodded in agreement and got to work herding her kits towards the den's exit with nudges of her muzzle. But, it took hardly any cajoling to convince them to play outside in the warm green-leaf day. In only a matter of moments, Dewleaf and the kits were gone, although Frostmask could still hear the kittens' paw-steps thundering outside the den— disproportionately loud for their size— as they scampered about.

For a moment, Frostmask and Autumnleap just stood in the relative silence of the den before Frostmask took the plunge of delicately settling in next to Mistkit and Newtkit. She tensed as the kits twitched, mewing softly at the disturbance when she curled around them. But, after only a heartbeat, the kittens settled back down and crawled towards her side before falling back into a deeper sleep, pressed into her long pelt.

Frostmask released a slow breath, her taunt shoulders relaxing.

"Newtkit didn't protest this time," she murmured. "I think they remember me."

"They better," Autumnleap said with a purr, taking a seat nearby. "But, even if they don't totally know us yet, they will soon enough."

"They're so young." Frostmask's gaze swept over Mistkit's tufts of downy fur as his tiny sides rose and fell with even breaths. "When they're older, they won't even remember any of this— not coming here... Not their birth mother."

Autumnleap nodded, his brow furrowed thoughtfully as he stared

down at the kits in silence for a few moments.

"...It's convincing," he said suddenly.

Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise.

"What is?" she asked, glancing up at him.

He nodded down at the kits, and Frostmask followed his gaze.

"That they were born to us," Autumnleap meowed. "Newtkit, she's got ginger like me. I mean, Redclaw's even a tortoiseshell too. And, Mistkit, well, he's grey like you are. If they grew up without knowing, do you think they could even guess that we aren't their birth-parents?"

Newtkit squirmed a bit, ruffling her black-and-orange patched fur, and Frostmask gently brushed her tail down her back to flatten it again.

"...They have to know," Frostmask muttered, still gazing at the kits. "They deserve to know the truth."

"But, do you think they could be happier if they didn't?" Autumnleap prompted.

Frostmask's stomach twisted. But, when she glanced up at Autumnleap, her brow furrowed deeply, he lifted a paw in a pacifying gesture.

"You're the one who grew up knowing that you weren't born in ShadowClan, so whatever *you* decide, I'll be perfectly content with," he continued. "I just wanted to bring up that point. I know there were times when you felt like you didn't belong here. They may too, unless they think they were born here..."

Frostmask sighed, her gaze lowering to the kits again. "I see your point, but we can't lie to them. It's not our place to take their heritage from them, even if there are cats here who find that heritage... less than ideal. And, besides, that's a whole other reason why they need to know the truth. The entire clan knows— someone will tell them. It's far better for it to be us than *Dampfang."*

Autumnleap huffed with humorless amusement.

"True," he said, settling down into a crouch and lowering his chin to the ground so that his nose was less that a whisker's length from the kits. "Alright. Then we'll tell them, when they're old enough to understand."

Frostmask nodded, and then the branches of the thorn bush rustled when Poolcloud suddenly stuck his head inside.

"Hello! Do you guys want some company?" he asked, his amber eyes bright as he blinked at Autumnleap and Frostmask, but his gaze quickly tracked down towards the kits. "I mean, only if you're up to taking visitors..."

"You're being far too passively polite, as usual Poolcloud," Pineshade's sharp voice cut in from somewhere behind him before Autumnleap or Frostmask could even reply. "Stand aside."

Poolcloud blinked in offense, but Pineshade was already squeezing around his bulk, ruffling her spiky pelt even more than usual in the process as she barged into the den.

"Alright. Let's see the little lumps that got the whole of ShadowClan's tails in a twist," she declared, striding towards Frostmask and Autumnleap.

"Pineshade!" Poolcloud hissed scoldingly, slipping in after her. "You didn't even give them a chance to respond! They may want to rest."

"It's alright I suppose," Frostmask spoke up. "I mean the kits are sleeping, but since you're already here..."

"Good!" Pineshade blinked smugly. "You won't be resting for a while anyway. I'm sure Redclaw and Weaseltail will be in here as soon as they get the chance. Snakeeyes and Murmurstep seemed quite curious about the litter as well. And, I'm sure Lizardstrike will want to look in at them at some point too."

Autumnleap huffed.

"Why don't we just hold a clan meeting in the nursery then?" he

asked drily.

Pineshade flicked her tail teasingly against his flank.

"May as well. You already had one meeting about the kits, why not another?" she retorted with a roll of her eye. *"StarClan.* And, I thought Poolcloud and Dewleaf were dramatic about their kits."

"Excuse me?" Poolcloud asked, his brow furrowing in mock offense as he padded up to her side.

Pineshade slid her gaze over to him, looking over out of the very corner of her eye.

"Don't get me wrong, I love the little scoundrels. But, when they were first born, the way you talked about them would make a cat think that the four of them were StarClan's chosen." Pineshade chuffed. "But, at least you haven't dragged the entire clan into discussing them at a meeting like Frostmask and Autumnleap did!"

"It was Sedgestar who wanted to hold a clan meeting," Frostmask grumbled, her tail-tip flicking. "He wanted to gauge the opinion of the clan before deciding to let Newtkit and Mistkit in or not."

Pineshade dislodged Frostmask's factual response with a flick of her ears. "Whatever. Now are you gonna show them to us or what?"

Frostmask glanced down and realized her tail had instinctively curled protectively around the kittens at Pineshade and Poolcloud's appearance, hiding them from sight. But, at Pineshade's prompting, she swept it away to reveal Newtkit and Mistkit's peacefully sleeping forms.

"Ooo! They're adorable!" Poolcloud cooed immediately, dipping his head to get a closer look.

"Their names fit them well." Pineshade's tone was far less overtly fawning than Poolcloud's, but even her face had softened. "Look at Newtkit's little spots."

"Her spots are so cute!" Poolcloud rumbled in enthusiastic agreement. "And Mistkit's fluffy coat!"

"They'll be strong warriors," Autumnleap said, gazing down at the kits again too. "Newtkit's got a lot of fire. And, Mistkit is stubborn. He was weaker than her when we found them, but he held on and he's doing well now."

"I can't wait until they get a bit older, and then they can play with my litter!" Poolcloud purred, his eyes shining. "It'll be so wonderful!"

Frostmask purred too, Poolcloud's words bringing forth a rush of images in her mind for a perfect future for the kits.

Despite Pineshade's earlier snide comments, she and Poolcloud seemed to understand that they shouldn't stay too long, so they soon gave their goodbyes and slipped from the den. But, as they left, Frostmask's thoughts continued to whirl as she imagined what the coming moons would have in store for Mistkit and Newtkit.

Like Poolcloud said, they would become close friends with his and Dewleaf's kits, of course, and have a wonderful time in the nursery. Then Frostmask would help Sedgestar pick out their mentors when it was time. Who would train them? Maybe she needed to see their personalities a bit more to figure out who would be the best fit, but Pineshade had already proved herself to be an excellent mentor to Cricketsong. And, Frostmask knew Poolcloud would be a great one too with his gentle, guiding encouragement...

Frostmask blinked, pulling herself from from her thoughts as reality set back in. She knew she shouldn't be too idealistic, and it was a bit silly to start planning out the kittens' perfect futures before they'd even opened their eyes. The kits would have struggles too, especially with cats like Dampfang in ShadowClan, and the threats they were currently facing from outside the clan.

Frostmask's gaze turned towards the nursery entrance as she tried to picture what was going on in ThunderClan and WindClan right now. Was WindClan actually planning some kind of attack because of her appointment to deputy? Was Morningstar really so easily influenced that the other leaders had turned him against ShadowClan completely? And, what about RiverClan? Willowstar was always such an enigma...

Why can't they all just leave ShadowClan alone?

"Do you need to go?" Autumnleap asked, seemingly sensing her restlessness.

Frostmask's ears flattened guiltily as she glanced over at Autumnleap. She'd only been in the nursery for a little while, and yet her worries about ShadowClan's situation had already pulled her thoughts far from Newtkit and Mistkit.

"I feel like I should be doing something," she admitted, lowering her gaze to the kits again. "ThunderClan and WindClan have been making me anxious. And, of course taking care of Mistkit and Newtkit is important... But, lying here does feel kind of wrong while the rest of the clan is checking the border and hunting and everything."

"I can't say that I'm surprised," Autumnleap meowed drily. "You've been so busy that we've hardly had much time to spend together. I didn't expect that you'd be in the nursery for long."

Frostmask's gaze flashed to him, and her ears pressed even lower to her head. Autumnleap's words stuck a nerve, likely more than he'd intended, and guilt flooded her, although the feeling was also tinged with righteous indignation.

It's not my fault! I never wanted this— to be deputy! I'm just trying to do my best with the situation I'm stuck in!

"I'm sorry," Frostmask muttered. "I hadn't wanted—"

"Don't apologize," Autumnleap gently interrupted. "I understand why, even if I don't like it. That's why I suggested I help you with the kits in the first place."

His whiskers twitched with rueful humor. "You've got a duty to ShadowClan, and I respect that, despite the fact that I'd prefer to have your attention all to myself and the kits."

Frostmask sighed, her gaze downcast.

"Sometimes I think I'd prefer that too," she muttered. "Being deputy

is just so much work! Especially with seemingly all the other clans breathing down our necks..."

Autumnleap leaned forward, gently brushing his cheek to hers.

"Tensions won't always be this high," he reassured.

Frostmask blinked doubtfully.

*But there will always be **something!** If it's not the other clans, it'll be a predator, or lack of prey, or two-legs... And, it'll always be all my responsibility to figure out how we survive it!*

Frostmask gave her head a small shake, trying to knock away the thoughts.

*I shouldn't be so selfish. We all contribute to taking care of each other, and all of ShadowClan is relying on me to do this role. Autumnleap, my friends, these kits— **my** kits— are.*

She dipped her head, grooming Mistkit's and Newtkit's pelts for a moment as Autumnleap twitched his ears towards the den's exit.

"Why don't you go out now then, and I'll stay with them," he suggested. "You'll be watching them all night while I'm at the gathering anyway, so may as well get your restlessness out now."

Relief that Autumnleap understood flooded through her, and once Frostmask was done flattening their kits' fur to her liking, she leaned forward to tuck her head under Autumnleap's chin, taking a moment to just shelter against him.

"Thank you," she breathed. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Autumnleap simply rumbled a deep purr in response, his chest vibrating against her cheek.

After Frostmask slipped out the nursery, she immediately headed for the camp's exit. She emerged into the forest, ready to trot off and burn off her anxious energy with a hunt or by joining one of the border patrols, but her paws slowed as she caught the sound of a familiar harsh tone. Her brow furrowing, Frostmask pricked her

ears, rotating them to better pick up the sound. She was too far away to make out the words, but she could decipher it as Dampfang's voice, and the other voice that responded to him, sharp with anger, was unmistakably Pineshade.

Frostmask's initial urge was just to turn aside and walk away—leaving them to sort out whatever fight they were having for the hundredth time. But, then a stronger urge swept over her, fueled by a powerful, incessant curiosity, and she found herself crouched down and creeping towards their arguing voices as silently as if she was stalking prey.

Slinking around the wide trunk of a pine tree, Frostmask paused when their voices came to her again, albeit much louder and clearer this time.

"You can't seriously think wasting food on those rogue-spawn is a good idea," Dampfang was snarling.

Frostmask tensed, hot anger knotting in her belly as her heart began hammering.

They're arguing about the kits?

"For the *last* time," Pineshade said, her voice strained as if she was grinding out the words from between her fangs. "Their names are Newtkit and Mistkit, and they're my kin now so watch your tongue, snake-heart."

Frostmask crept forward until she could peer cautiously around the trunk. With the dense pines and deep shadows, she could only catch a few glimpses of the pair in the distance, but she was still able to make out Pineshade's raised hackles and Dampfang's lashing tail stirring up the dried, brown pine needles on the ground beneath him.

"'Kin?" Dampfang echoed with a hiss of shock. "You want to claim relation to them?"

"Well Autumnleap is going to be their father, isn't he?" Pineshade fired back.

Dampfang snarled with exasperation, his claws tearing up the peaty earth.

"This is absurd. What in StarClan's name happened to you?" Dampfang snapped.

"What happened to *me?"* The pitch and volume of Pineshade's voice rose with her indignation. "What happened to *you?* You've become so *hateful."*

Dampfang's only response was the prolonged rumble of a growl. Pineshade sighed heavily, and Frostmask saw her bristling fur flattening.

"Or maybe you're right," Pineshade growled, this time her voice quiet enough that Frostmask had to strain her ears to hear. "Maybe I am the one who's changed, and my eyes have just been opened to how you've always been... Frostmask was right."

Frostmask's ears perked in surprise at this admittance, but Dampfang's reaction was just to grow more furious. The anger descended over him like a dark cloud, his claws flexing out and his thrashing tail picking up in speed.

"Don't speak of Frostmask to me," he spat, the words vibrating with poorly contained rage.

"I'll *speak* how I want," Pineshade snarled back without hesitation, her voice sharpening with outrage again. "I'm so, so tired of this, Dampfang. I'm tired of *you.* I've spent moons twisting myself into knots to try to make you happy, but now, I just don't care! I don't care what you think of me anymore, and I don't care if you're happy. So go on. Go be as miserable and angry and awful as you want. But, don't involve me in it because *this*— you and me... it's done. For good."

Frostmask tensed in shock for a moment, but her surprise was quickly washed away by a food of intense relief.

Pineshade's finally had enough!

Frostmask exhaled a deep, shaky breath, but she couldn't entirely

celebrate yet. Dampfang had still not responded to Pineshade, and if Frostmask knew anything about him, he would surely not take this rejection well.

A bit of worry prickling at her paws, Frostmask slipped forward until she finally had a clear view of the two of them. Dampfang had not moved, but his lashing tail slowed until it held out still and stiff behind him. His upper lip twitched as if he was fighting back a snarl, but besides that, it was hard for Frostmask to read the emotions on his face. Pineshade's expression, however, was clear as the sun on a cloudless day, blazing with conviction as she glared up at him.

"...You don't mean that," Dampfang finally said in a dangerously low voice. "Calm down, and we'll speak again when you're not being so irrational."

At first, Pineshade made a choked, indignant noise from the back of her throat at his outright denial, as if she couldn't believe that he had actually just said such a thing. But, as Dampfang remained unyielding, Pineshade's surprise quickly gave way to anger, and the fury that carved into her features was so vehement that Frostmask *might* have felt pity for Dampfang— if he wasn't possibly the worst cat in the entire forest.

Her amber gaze burning, Pineshade took a single step forward, drew herself up to her full height, and tilted her chin upwards so she and Dampfang were almost nose-to-nose.

Pineshade opened her mouth slowly and spoke with careful, deliberate enunciation.

"Bite me."

With that, she whirled on her heel and stalked away, her black pelt quickly getting lost in the deep shadows of the forest. Dampfang's fur bushed out as he watched her go.

"Pineshade," he snarled wrathfully, sinking his claws into the ground.

Frostmask's gaze tracked after Pineshade, but she wasn't turning around. Not even an ear twitched back in his direction.

"...Pineshade?" Dampfang called, and this time there was less anger and more desperation to the word. "Pineshade!"

She didn't come back.

Frostmask gazed after her friend, powerful admiration welling in her chest.

But then, snarling with frustration, Dampfang whipped around and stomped off in the opposite direction from her, heading vaguely towards Frostmask.

Frostmask's admiration quickly gave way to panic, and she scrambled to duck in between the knobby roots of a nearby tree to hide, her heartbeat as rapid as a frightened rabbit's. She wasn't sure what Dampfang would do to her if he caught her eavesdropping while he was in such a state, but she at least knew she wouldn't be coming out of it with her pelt fully intact.

However, Dampfang was thankfully too wrapped up in his own anger to notice her. He stormed past Frostmask's hiding place without pause, raking his claws through a patch of ferns that blocked his path and crushing them into the mud before continuing on into the trees and disappearing from view.

Frostmask waited a few moments longer to be sure that he was truly gone. When Dampfang did not return, Frostmask squeezed out from the roots with a sigh of relief, and her gaze turned to where Pineshade disappeared.

I should make sure she's okay.

Following her fresh scent trail, Frostmask set off after her at a trot. Pineshade's scent led her away from camp, and soon the tall, straight pines were replaced by hunched, knobby sycamores as Frostmask entered into the marshier parts of ShadowClan's territory.

Brushing through tall strands of grasses and reeds, Frostmask did

her best to stay on Pineshade's trail as her senses were barraged with sheer amount of life spilling out of the green-leaf marsh. Croaking frogs and buzzing insects hummed in her ears, and the sweet scents of flowers and tempting scent trails of water voles filled her nose, threatening to distract her from continuing after Pineshade.

Frostmask soldiered on, but some dismay started to build in her stomach as the sound of running water grew louder. The tall grasses and reeds finally parted as the stream came into view, the muddy-brown water gurgling contentedly as it flowed past her paws.

Pineshade's scent led straight ahead, and if that wasn't clear enough, a fresh paw-print was pressed right into the mud at the edge of the water.

Frostmask groaned, her ears flattening.

Did Pineshade seriously swim across?!

Frostmask glanced from side to side. There wasn't a single tree-bridge or set of stepping stones in sight. Frostmask could go looking for one and then keep going after Pineshade, but at that point, she'd have such a big lead from Frostmask that she'd be better off just waiting for her back at camp.

Frostmask stared hard at the still surface of the water.

The stream wasn't like how it was last green-leaf, when it had flooded over its banks and Frostmask had nearly drowned. Today it looked slow-moving, and truthfully, rather benign. A frog even hopped into it and swam across, its tiny body easily resisting the current.

Frostmask hesitantly lifted a paw, her pad hovering a couple mouse-lengths over the surface of the water.

Since that day as an apprentice when she almost died, Frostmask hadn't entered water that went deep enough to touch her belly when she stood in it, sticking only to walking through shallow puddles and streams. Anything deeper, she'd find another way

across. But, maybe she'd let her fear rule her long enough. All other ShadowClan cats weren't afraid of getting their paws wet, although it was true that they didn't relish in it like RiverClan cats did. But, it was almost a necessity on territory as wet as theirs.

What if one day the marsh flooded even worse than before, and Frostmask needed to swim to survive? What if Mistkit and Newtkit were one day swept away by rapids— she'd *have* to know how to swim to save them like how Swoopstrike had saved her.

Her heart hammered as her toes dipped closer to the surface.

Frostmask's throat suddenly tightened as if the water was already in her mouth, strangling her. She jerked back from the edge of the stream, every hair on her pelt screaming for her to get away from the danger. Her blood roared in her ears, her chest heaving, although it didn't seem to bring enough air to help her struggling lungs.

Frostmask stumbled away from the bank, her panic fading painfully slowly, until it eventually allowed her to regain control over her breath. She shuddered, sinking her claws into the muddy ground.

She hadn't even gotten her pelt wet, but the water had won again.

Frostmask's head jerked to the side at the sound of rustling grasses. A mud-splattered white pelt emerged from the reeds, dragging a large piece of prey between his forepaws.

Lizardstrike dropped the large rodent, blinking at Frostmask curiously. She quickly straightened, trying to wash any remnants of panic from her expression and flatten her bristling pelt.

'What's that?' she asked, slipping into paw-signing as she gestured to the piece of fresh-kill at Lizardstrike's paws.

He turned the brown-furred rodent over with a push of his paw to give Frostmask a better look.

'Muskrat.' Lizardstrike lightly brushed his paw over his nose in indication. *'It's smell made it easy to find through all the other scents.'*

Frostmask gazed at the large piece of prey appreciatively, pride for her former apprentice prickling her. She'd seen an occasional muskrat lurking in the marshes, and caught their scents, but she'd never seen anyone catch one before. They were excellent swimmers and often slipped away into the water before a cat could grab them. Lizardstrike must have either been able to ambush it when it was out of the stream or he went in after it. Judging by the droplets of water and mud beaded on his pelt, it was likely the latter.

'Well done. It's so huge it'll feed nearly all the elders,' she signed.

Lizardstrike nodded his thanks, and an awkward pause fell over the pair. Since that day when Lizardstrike, Cedarfur and their other friends had decided to take on a fox, Frostmask and Lizardstrike hadn't really talked more than passing conversations here or there. He had his friends, and Frostmask had her deputy duties, which kept them both busy. Although Frostmask missed his company, there was nothing she could do if he preferred to spend his time more with other cats than with her.

'What are you doing out here?' Lizardstrike asked finally. *'I thought you didn't like the marsh.'*

'I like the marsh. I don't like the water,' Frostmask corrected.

Lizardstrike's whiskers twitched with faint amusement.

'Well you're pretty close to that right now too,' he pointed out.

Frostmask shuffled her paws, her pelt starting to warm slightly with shame.

'I'm just... When I was an apprentice, Dampfang knocked me into this stream.' She nodded towards the water. *'I almost died, but Swoopstrike saved me from drowning. I've been scared of water since then. But I guess... I'm trying to get over that.'*

'By getting in the water? Swimming?' Lizardstrike clarified.

Frostmask's ears flattened in embarrassment.

But, I couldn't even get myself to step in it!

She shuffled her paws.

'Something like that,' she signed.

Lizardstrike gazed at her as if he'd somehow still heard what she'd not told him. He nodded, and then he turned towards the stream, unceremoniously plunging in and splashing out a couple tail-lengths from the bank, but still close enough to the edge that he could still stand.

'I'll help you.'

The fur down Frostmask's spine started to lift.

'That's not really necessary,' she signed, scrambling for an excuse. *'I'm sure you've got other things to do...'*

Lizardstrike shook his head, indicating no, he did not actually. Then he waved her over with his tail.

'Come on!'

Frostmask hesitated, her eyes locked on the rippling water's surface. She took a few slow steps back towards the stream, her muscles straining against the movement. This time she managed to place her two forepaws at the very edge of the water, but her legs started trembling so much that she quickly withdrew again.

'I don't want to,' she signed. *'I... can't.'*

Lizardstrike blinked at her thoughtfully for a moment before padding back towards the bank, water streaming from his sides. He picked up the muskrat and, signing for her to follow him with a flick of his tail, he trotted into the tall grasses.

Surrendering to the fact that she would not be speaking to Pineshade right now, Frostmask followed him. His stride confident, Lizardstrike led her through the marsh until the grasses parted again when they reached a large pool. A few frogs startled at their appearance, leaping into the water and sending ripples spreading across the green-brown surface.

Lizardstrike plopped his fresh-kill back down on the ground, glancing over at Frostmask.

'This is better. No current and it's not the same stream where you fell in,' he signed.

Frostmask blinked doubtfully at the stagnant pool, taking in the algae-coated water and flicking her ears to shoo off mosquitos and nagging flies as she silently questioned Lizardstrike's word choice of 'better.'

Lizardstrike clearly had none of her same qualms since he sprung right into the water again, half-walking and half-paddling into the center of the pool.

'Come on! It's not so bad.'

Although the water masked some of his movements, Frostmask could still see enough of Lizardstrike's signs to understand, and it was helped by the fact he lifted his tail and forepaws above the water's surface.

Frostmask swept a critical glance over the pool. Where Lizardstrike was in the center, presumably the deepest part, she could tell he was still able to touch the ground. At least, he could balance on his hindlegs on it enough to lift his forepaws above the surface without need for paddling. But, Frostmask was shorter than Lizardstrike, which meant if she was next to him, she'd almost certainly have to be swimming.

Frostmask hesitantly dabbed a paw at the pool, her toes skimming through the warm water and the scum that coated the surface. The dampness sticking on her fur was as unpleasant as ever, but to her relief, the water didn't trigger a rush of panic this time.

Maybe Lizardstrike is onto something with the lack of current.

Still though, every inch of her dragged with reluctance to actually get in the water.

If I stall long enough, he might get bored and give up.

Frostmask's thoughts searched for a different topic of conversation, but she didn't even have to bring one up since Lizardstrike did it for her.

'So kits, huh?' he signed, his eyes sparkling with interest as he gazed at her.

Frostmask reclined back on her haunches.

'I was wondering when you were going to ask about that,' she responded, giving a small sigh. *'Are you also going to tell me what a bad idea it is, since I'm already so busy as deputy?'*

Lizardstrike made a gesture that might have been a shrug, but it was a bit hard for Frostmask to tell with all the murky water swirling around him.

'If you want them, then you should go for it and you'll figure it out. I think you'll be a good mom.'

Frostmask glanced away from Lizardstrike, her throat tightening with sudden emotion, brought on not just by Lizardstrike's faith in her, but also being able to just talk to him about things like this. She'd missed these kinds of moments.

When Frostmask managed to glance back up at Lizardstrike again, her interest sharpened as she noticed that he'd started to paddle around in lazy circles as he waited for her, his kicks cutting strongly through the water and propelling him on.

'You swim so well. How'd you learn that?' Frostmask asked.

She certainly at least hadn't taught him it. Lizardstrike slowed, swimming into a shallower part of the pool before stopping so he was able to sign again.

'Cedarfur taught me.'

Frostmask's stomach twisted at the reminder of why she and Lizardstrike had grown distant, a deep bitterness settling on her tongue.

'Does he swim in his free time between lying to me and disobeying my orders?' she asked, her tail-tip flicking with annoyance.

Lizardstrike straightened, his brilliant blue eyes suddenly bright with outrage. *'You're not being fair.'*

'Did I say anything that's not true?' Frostmask demanded.

Lizardstrike's lip twitched in a hint of a snarl.

'Cedarfur is a good warrior,' he signed.

Frostmask hissed in wordless irritation, her tail lashing now as emotion spurred her to her feet. Pineshade had finally broken free of Dampfang, but Frostmask and her friends still couldn't entirely escape his tendrils as Lizardstrike just seemed to fall deeper and deeper under the spell of Dampfang's apprentice. How did Lizardstrike not get it?

'He made you lie to me!' Frostmask signed.

Lizardstrike smacked his tail against the surface of the pool in anger, showering himself in water.

'All Cedarfur wanted to do was impress you by tracking down the foxes! He was rash, yes, and I see that it was a bad idea now. But his motivations were good, and he didn't make me lie to you. That was ***my*** *idea. Because I'd knew you'd do this! You're so biased against him!'*

Frostmask's fur rose defensively, her stomach rolling as denial and dismay battled inside her.

Had Lizardstrike really felt like he had to lie to her?

'I— I'm not biased against him. I assign Cedarfur to the same patrols and give him the same duties as everyone else...' Frostmask signed as she struggled to defend herself.

'But you look at him like you're waiting for him to do something wrong,' Lizardstrike accused. *'You look at him like he's Dampfang. But, Cedarfur is not his mentor. He's his own cat.'*

Frostmask stared at Lizardstrike, her ears and whiskers drooping as shame and dismay finally entirely won and flooded over her.

After a moment of stillness, the harsh edges of Lizardstrike's face softened as he gazed at her expression, and he started to paddle over towards her.

'I'm sorry,' Frostmask signed as she took a seat heavily on the muddy ground, not caring that it splattered all over her coat. *'I can't believe I made you and Cedarfur feel so uncomfortable around me. Snake-dung, I'm such a lousy deputy.'*

Lizardstrike stopped, still in the water, but now only a couple of tail-lengths away.

'I know you're just trying to look out for me,' he signed, his motions much gentler now. *'But, I'm not your kits, and I'm also not your apprentice anymore. I'll always want to come to you for advice, but my decisions are my own. You've gotta trust me.'*

Frostmask sighed, her belly still tight with guilt and her eyes stinging, but she nodded slowly.

Lizardstrike lifted his brows.

'So do you trust me?' he prompted.

'Yes,' Frostmask signed.

A loud purr began to rumble in Lizardstrike's throat.

'Good. Then come here. I won't let you drown.'

Frostmask froze for a moment as hesitation gripped her again when she stared down at the water. But when she lifted her gaze back to Lizardstrike, he was gazing at her so earnestly that she couldn't find it in her to refuse. Steeling herself, Frostmask rose to her paws and took a step into the pool before she could allow herself another thought and lose her nerve.

The first couple steps weren't that bad as the warm water only splashed up her legs. It was only when it started to lap at her belly

fur that the first stirrings of panic set back in and begun to crawl up Frostmask's throat. But, then Lizardstrike was at her side, his tail draped over her back in a steady, anchoring gesture and a comforting purr rumbling uninterrupted in his throat, and the terror started to ebb.

Despite the warmth, Frostmask's legs still trembled involuntarily as she and Lizardstrike slowly made their way into the deeper part of the pool. The water rose to her stomach, and then to her sides. Finally it started to lap hungrily at her shoulders, and Frostmask's forepaws began to rise off the ground as the water buoyed her up.

That feeling of weightlessness brought with it a rush of unpleasant memories and feelings— the confusing swirl of bubbles in front of her face, the panic of her burning lungs, and the cold acceptance of death as darkness tugged at the edges of her vision.

"I need to go back," Frostmask gasped, her determination fleeing her as terror took its place. "Lizardstrike, take me back."

Frostmask's heart thumped in her ears as their steady, even walk towards the center of the pool turned into her flailing her paws, trying to thrust herself upwards and out of the water as much as she could.

Frostmask didn't know how much of what she said Lizardstrike could understand from lip-reading, but he'd understood her intention at least, since he promptly turned them around, half guiding and half pushing her back towards the nearest edge of the pool.

Once Frostmask was clear of the water, she flopped to the ground, her breaths still coming in and out in ragged gasps. Lizardstrike crouched down at her side, his blue eyes round with concern.

'I'm okay,' Frostmask managed to sign. *'I just need a moment.'*

Lizardstrike nodded and began to rasp his tongue over Frostmask's pelt, grooming out the mud and the water. The soothing activity helped calm Frostmask, and soon her heaving chest settled down into a much more reasonable rhythm.

'I think that's enough for today,' Frostmask signed once her rate of breathing was back fully under her control. *'But, maybe we could try again some other time.'*

Frostmask's whiskers twitched with rueful humor.

'And maybe I'll actually manage to go deep enough to ***swim*** *next time.'*

Lizardstrike stopped grooming to gently bunt his head to hers. *'You did pretty good for a first attempt.'*

A quiet purr rumbled to life in Frostmask's chest. Despite her discomfort and fear with water, her experience with it today had at least delivered something valuable, since she'd been able to spend some precious time with Lizardstrike. And, just maybe, that meant that the rift that had grown between them had started to close.

Of course we'll be busy with our own lives, but at least we can still be friends.

A pickle of guilt nettled Frostmask again.

And I'll have to be more forgiving towards Cedarfur.

Frostmask leaned herself against Lizardstrike's side, pressing her cheek to his shoulder for a moment.

'...Thank you, Lizardstrike.'

Consequences

Dark clouds were gathering at the edges of the horizon, but the full moon still hung unobstructed in the middle of the sky when night fell and Frostmask's clan-mates grouped in the camp clearing, preparing to depart for the gathering. Leaving Mistkit and Newtkit with Larkfoot and Dewleaf for the moment, Frostmask followed Autumnleap from the nursery, padding with him over to the others to see them off.

From the edge of the group, Greytail sent a narrowed-eyed glance up towards the partially overcast sky, her eyes skimming over the tendrils of the clouds that seemed to be stretching out from the borders of the darkening horizon and towards the moon.

"That's a poor omen if I've ever seen one," she grumbled to her fellow nearby elders.

Frostmask's paws prickled nervously at Greytail's words, and she shot a glance over at Clearstream, hoping the retired medicine cat had something to say to assuage Greytail's fears. But, Clearstream silently just shifted from paw to paw, and Frostmask got the sense that she might actually agree with Greytail's assessment.

Frostmask turned her gaze onto Sedgestar. Judging by the angle of his ears in Greytail's direction, he'd heard her too, although he didn't respond. And, evidently, Frostmask and Sedgestar weren't the only ones who had overhead the elder, since Mosspounce also glanced up at the sky, studying what was quickly starting to look like a building storm.

"Should we even go?" Mosspounce asked hesitantly, her gaze flitting over their clan-mates.

"If the winds change, and the sky becomes clear, ShadowClan cannot be seen to miss the gathering for the second time in a row," Sedgestar spoke up finally. "We must at least make an attempt. But, if the moon becomes covered before the gathering begins, we will

turn back to camp."

Murmurs of agreement rose up from the crowd. With a cold, uneasy feeling in her stomach slithering around like a snake, Frostmask turned to Autumnleap and lightly brushed her muzzle against his in goodbye.

"Say hello to Larchtail or Mottledflame for me, if you see them," Frostmask murmured. "And keep an eye out. I have a bad feeling about tonight."

"You and Greytail should start a pessimists' club," Autumnleap said, his amber eyes sparkling with his gentle teasing. "It can't be that bad. It's the night of truce after all."

"A truce that has been broken before," Frostmask pointed out.

He blinked at her reassuringly.

"I'll be careful," he promised.

Frostmask nodded, leaving Autumnleap to walk over to Sedgestar briefly. His amber gaze flickered to her.

"We'll speak when we get back," Sedgestar said.

"Of course," Frostmask meowed.

Sedgestar summoned the group to him with a wave of his striped tail, before turning and slinking out of the thorn tunnel, his patrol streaming out behind him.

With a quiet sigh to herself, Frostmask took a seat in the now silent camp. Her gaze was pulled up to the sky, and she studied the glowing yellow moon and the part of dark indigo expanse that was not yet blotted out by clouds.

She wasn't typically one to send out pleas to StarClan, but she found a simple prayer forming in her mind.

Please keep ShadowClan safe.

The stars twinkled down at her, and Frostmask lowered her eyes, feeling a bit more at ease. She at least knew that if Swoopstrike or Grovepelt or any of her other dead clan-mates had any say in the matter, they would be doing their best.

A shifting shadow in the corner of her eye caught Frostmask's attention. She turned her gaze towards the thorn barrier, and she saw Pineshade's head poke in through the thorn tunnel. Her amber gaze darted around camp for a few moments before settling on Frostmask.

"Did everyone in the gathering patrol leave?" Pineshade hissed in a loud whisper, her ears twitching.

Frostmask tilted her head to the side, a bit bemused at Pineshade's nervousness.

"Yeah. You just missed them," Frostmask said.

Pineshade immediately perked up, her gaze brightening. "Oh perfect!"

Pineshade strode into the clearing, heading towards Frostmask.

"I'm avoiding Dampfang," she explained. "Today we—"

"Oh... er— I already know," Frostmask admitted, her ears flattening sheepishly. "I heard you two out in the forest earlier."

Pineshade paused mid-stride, her ears pricking in surprise. Frostmask winced faintly, bracing herself for a scolding.

"But, I didn't tell anyone else about it or anything!" she meowed quickly in her defense. "You guys were talking really loudly. Honestly, me overhearing you was kinda unavoidable—"

Pineshade just snorted at her excuses, rolling her eye.

"Uh-huh. Sure it was," she drawled.

Pineshade then resumed padding over until she was right next to Frostmask, where she unceremoniously plopped to the ground. She

licked a paw and dragged it over her ear causally.

"You know, cats don't give you enough credit," Pineshade said matter-of-factly, her gaze glinting mischievously. "You're way more stealthy than they say."

Relief that Pineshade wasn't mad prickling at her, Frostmask's shoulders relaxed, and she rumbled a *mrrow* of laughter.

"Oh *'they* say,' huh?" Frostmask echoed, her whiskers twitching in amusement. "And, who exactly is it that's saying I'm not stealthy?"

Pineshade blinked in exaggerated innocence.

"I don't know. Definitely not me," she said in a not-at-all suspiciously swift voice. *"Anyway,* it's actually convenient that you already know. Now I don't have to put in the effort of explaining the whole thing."

Pineshade rolled onto her back with a sigh, stretching her forelegs far out in front of her and flexing her toes in the air.

"You know, I thought I'd feel bad about it, at least a bit. But I don't, and you wouldn't believe how *relieved* I am instead." Pineshade gave a long exhale. "It's like a boulder of weight been removed from my shoulders, and I feel so light now... I think it's because I'd really given up on him a while ago, but it just took some time to admit it to myself."

Frostmask settled down next to her in a neat crouch, tucking her paws under her chest.

"You got there eventually, and that's the important part," Frostmask pointed out. "I'm happy for you."

Pineshade huffed in dry amusement, glancing up at her from upside down.

"'You got there eventually, and that's the important part,'" she mimicked her in an overly stiff, formal tone. "You don't have to sound so proper— like a deputy giving advice to an unruly warrior."

Pineshade stuck her tongue out at her, wrinkling her face up. "Come on, Frost. You must be dying to say 'I told you so.'"

Frostmask purred.

"I've grown wise enough to know saying something like that to your face is a bad idea," she teased. "I'd like to keep my whiskers not clawed off, thank you very much."

"But, I know you're thinking it," Pineshade said, her one eye narrowing suspiciously.

Still though, Pineshade didn't press her on it, instead she rolled onto her side to pensively stare out into camp, her amused expression fading.

"It's going to be kinda tough to be around Dampfang for a while though," she continued, her tail-tip starting to tap against the ground. "Remember how awkward it was when we first became warriors? It'll be like that but worse."

Frostmask's ears flicked, easily recalling those unpleasant memories.

"Yeah. I'm not looking forward to Dampfang being even more of a badger than usual," she said, exhaling sharply. "Although I'm sure it'll be worse for you. He didn't exactly sound like he agreed about breaking up. Do you think he'll pester you to give him another chance like before?"

"Maybe." Pineshade sighed briefly, giving her head a small shake. "But, it's done. Forever this time. I just wish that there was someway that I didn't have to keep being around him. At least, until things blow over a bit more."

Frostmask murmured a quiet agreement, but there was nothing she could do to help with that. StarClan knows, Frostmask had wished that Dampfang would just go away probably more times than she could count. But, it was just something that was unavoidable when living in a clan— everyone was always stuck together, for good and for bad, no matter what.

After a beat of silence Pineshade's gaze turned back to Frostmask,

and her amber eye widened appealingly.

"Can you make Dampfang go sleep in the apprentices' den?" she asked. "At least for a little bit?"

Frostmask huffed at the absurdity of Pineshade's request, shaking her head.

"Yeah, sure. And I bet when Dampfang goes complaining to Sedgestar about it, he won't think that sounds like an abuse of power at all," Frostmask meowed sarcastically.

"It wouldn't be so bad," Pineshade protested, although she gave a *mrrow* of laughter which showed she wasn't really taking the argument seriously. "It's not like there's even any apprentices in it right now. He'd have the whole den to himself. So much peace and quiet and room to stretch out."

"Well if it's so nice, why don't you go sleep there instead?" Frostmask asked, her whiskers twitching in amusement. "There. Problem solved."

Pineshade shook her head. "No, I can't just go sleep there instead because I spent ages collecting feathers and putting my perfect, soft nest together! *Duh.* It was already enough work earlier today just to take it apart and reassemble it on the other side of the warriors' den, away from Dampfang's. I'm *not* dragging it across camp too."

Pineshade prodded Frostmask's side with one of her hindpaws, her amber eye brightening. "Oh and that reminds me, I put my nest where yours and Autumnleap's used to be. I figured you two wouldn't need the spot since you'll be spending so much time in the nursery now..."

Frostmask's ears pricked in dismay, her amusement fading rapidly. "What?! You destroyed my nest? We were still going to use that! And Pineshade, I *just* changed that moss—"

Pineshade purred loudly, interrupting her.

"Relax! I'm kidding," she said, shaking her head at Frostmask's gullibility. "Your nest is still intact, mine is just next to yours. I just

scooted your nest over a *tiny* bit, so that mine is closer to the cozier center of the den."

"Of course you did," Frostmask deadpanned.

Pineshade poked at Frostmask's side again a few times, her eye sparkling teasingly. "Isn't this fun? Now that we've both decided we don't like Dampfang, we can spend *all* of our time together instead. Just me and Frostmask, hanging out. Forever."

Frostmask shook her head in amused exasperation. She was glad that Pineshade seemed to be in such a good mood after ending things with Dampfang. But, with everything else Frostmask had going on, with being deputy, and the other clans, and her new family... she wasn't sure if she would often have the energy for her friend's antics.

"Really?" Frostmask asked, rumbling a brief purr. "I give it two days before you and Autumnleap are clawing each other's ears in frustration."

Pineshade's brow furrowed.

"Oh yeah," she said, giving a huff of annoyance even as she continued to purr. "Remind me why, out of all cats, you've chosen to be with my aggravating brother?"

"Uh well, the first reason is I love him," Frostmask said matter-of-factly. "And, the second reason is we're raising kits together now, remember?"

Pineshade nose wrinkled up in a faint look of disgust. "Ew."

Frostmask rolled her eyes.

"Don't worry," she meowed drily. "I doubt you'll be lonely, even when you're not around me. You've got other friends too, remember. And, a whole patrol's worth of kits that adore you. And, I'm sure once Murmurstep hears that you're available, she'll be happy to keep you company—"

"Oh shut up!" Pineshade cut her off, giving Frostmask's side a

slightly harder thump with her hindpaw for emphasis.

Frostmask lashed out a paw to bat her ears in response, and Pineshade's lip curled back in a snarl, although she was still purring.

"You're not allowed to kick the deputy!" Frostmask growled playfully, her eyes narrowing.

"You won't be deputy for much longer, vile tyrant!" Pineshade spat dramatically, her spiky dark-furred tail whipping from side to side. "I'm usurping you!"

She launched herself up at Frostmask, wrapping her forepaws around her shoulders and dragging her with her back down to the ground. For a few moments, the two rolled around like kits, swatting at and nipping each other but not bothering to use anything that resembled real battle moves. But, it wasn't long before Frostmask rolled away from her to rise back to her paws, shaking the dirt from her pelt.

"Truce?" she asked, her amusement fading as reality set back in. "I really better go back to Newtkit and Mistkit."

"Alright," Pineshade said, yawning widely. "But don't think this means I'm going to allow your tyranny to continue."

Frostmask huffed.

"Because I told you that you couldn't kick me?" she quipped from over her shoulder as she trotted off towards the nursery.

"Exactly," Pineshade drawled, lazily rolling to her paws.

Shaking her head, Frostmask ducked under the thorn bush that sheltered the cozy den. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dimness as she tiptoed inside. Although her interaction with Pineshade had kept her away from her kits longer than she'd intended, it had also put her in a better mood, which was even more improved by the familiar, comforting scent of the nursery wreathing around her.

Dewleaf, Amberberry, and their kits were already sleeping. Minnowkit, Marigoldkit, and Mallowkit were getting big— their lanky legs tangled together in a gold and ginger pile as they slept, snoring slightly next to their mother. Dewleaf was on the other side of them, her smaller kits piled up near or on her. Sprucekit was sprawled over Dewleaf's shoulders, while Lichenkit curled up delicately against the curve of her mother's side. Mudkit was lying on his back on the other side of Dewleaf, his fluffy white belly exposed to the air for all to see, while Fogkit was draped over Dewleaf's tail.

Purring softly, Frostmask padded past them, heading over to where Larkfoot lay with Newtkit and Mistkit a couple of tail-lengths away from the others, keeping the newborns safely out of the way from the often rowdy older kits. When Frostmask reached them, Larkfoot wordlessly rose to her paws to give the spot to Frostmask. She gave Frostmask a friendly blink as she padded past her, heading closer to Dewleaf where she curled up to sleep.

Frostmask lay down, curving herself around Mistkit and Newtkit who stirred drowsily at her touch. Frostmask bent her head, grooming them both with a few firm but gentle licks. Mistkit's soft, fluffy fur tickled her nose as she groomed him, and when she turned her attention to Newtkit, the tiny kit kneaded at the air. Frostmask purred louder, soft contentment draping over her like a blanket of feathers.

Even though they'd only been here for one day, the kits already seemed to be flourishing. They'd clearly grown used to ShadowClan's nursery, Frostmask, Autumnleap, and the other queens. They looked healthy, and not a trace of thunderpath scent remained on their pelts.

Keeping her gaze locked on Mistkit and Newtkit, Frostmask placed her chin down on her paws. A rush of affection flooded her, warming her heart as the kits snuggled into her fur, their small bodies vibrating with their purrs. Frostmask looped her tail around them, pulling them closer, and her eyelids began to droop. Although worry about the gathering still nagged at her, Frostmask's final thought before drifting off to sleep was that maybe things weren't going so badly after all.

Frostmask stirred awake at the sounds of concerned voices talking in the camp clearing and the patter of rain against the nursery's roof. Frostmask blinked, lifting her head from her nest, anxiety and curiosity immediately sparking off her pelt, but she didn't have the chance to rise to her paws before the thorn bush shook slightly as Autumnleap entered inside, flicking water droplets from his ears.

"How was it?" Frostmask asked quickly, keeping her voice hushed to not disturb the kits, although Dewleaf, Amberberry, and Larkfoot all blinked awake.

Autumnleap winced faintly, and that was enough for Frostmask to know that it must have been bad.

"Sedgestar would like to speak with you in his den. He'll probably tell you everything," Autumnleap told her quietly.

Worry surged in Frostmask's gut, and she scrambled to her paws. Newtkit mewed as her warmth left her side, and Frostmask bent her head to soothingly touch her nose to her kit's head before stepping out of the nest.

"Make sure you lick your pelt totally dry before touching the kits," Larkfoot ordered Autumnleap before he could even get within a tail-length of the nest.

Instead, Larkfoot took Frostmask's place with Newtkit and Mistkit herself for the moment.

"Yes ma'am," Autumnleap muttered, getting to work grooming the water from his long pelt.

Frostmask gave his shoulder a quick lick before entering out into the rain herself. Despite what seemed to be an eventful gathering, the clearing had already emptied, her clan-mates likely retreating to their nests to avoid the rain. Frostmask hurried across the camp, quickly reaching the Oak Tree's roots where the entrance to Sedgestar's den lay.

"Sedgestar?" she called, but she didn't wait for his response before slipping into the tunnel and padding down the short passage and

into his den.

Since the moon was now hidden by the clouds, the inside of the earthen cave was near pitch-black, although Frostmask could still faintly make out the silhouette of Sedgestar sitting to the side of his nest.

"Hello Frostmask," Sedgestar greeted her with a sigh.

Sedgestar must have asked Emberflower to allow him to speak with Frostmask alone, since only he was present at the moment. And, despite his mostly collected pose, Sedgestar's tail flipped with agitation, which made the worry prickling through Frostmask worse. Still though, Sedgestar nodded for Frostmask to sit too, and she obeyed, even as her paws still itched with anxious energy.

"What happened?" Frostmask asked. "Did the rain interrupt the gathering?"

"Let's just start from the beginning," Sedgestar said, running a paw over his weary face. "As soon as we arrived, I got a sense of tension radiating from the other leaders. Morningstar hardly wanted to speak to me, or even look me in the eye. Willowstar's tongue was silver and forked, and Rabbitstar's snippy. Although that's hardly new or notable for the two of them."

Frostmask nodded along, Sedgestar's words unfurling an image in her mind of the leaders perched upon the Great Rock, and the pressure that loomed between them like a storm.

"Strangely enough," Sedgestar continued, "Fennelstar was the only subdued one, although I don't think that had anything to do with us. His seasons seem to be finally catching up to him. I doubt he'll make it to see the end of leaf-fall."

Frostmask blinked.

And then Paledusk will be leader of SkyClan.

Her brow furrowed. That should improve the relationship between ShadowClan and SkyClan, right? But, if the impression Frostmask was already getting about the gathering was correct, then

ShadowClan may need SkyClan's alliance moons before that could happen.

"Then the announcements began," Sedgestar said, his brow knitting. "The other leaders insisted that I go first to explain ShadowClan's absence from the previous gathering. Rabbitstar insinuated that we may be considering abandoning a warrior's way of life entirely since ShadowClan seemed so ready to ignore aspects of the code which did not 'suit Sedgestar and his rogue deputy.'"

Sedgestar's eyes darkened with anger, and Frostmask's stomach twisted up into anxious knots. "I, of course, explained Grovepelt's passing, and that we were mourning him the night of the last gathering. I then made our other announcements, alerting the other clans that you and Autumnleap had welcomed a litter of kits, which is why you could not make it to this gathering. They all accepted this easily. I also informed the clans that last night a patrol of ShadowClan warriors found a deceased rogue queen by the thunderpath that separates us and ThunderClan, the investigation of which led them slightly over the border."

Frostmask gave a small sigh of relief.

It doesn't sound like anyone had anything to say in protest about Mistkit and Newtkit at least. Paledusk will know that I didn't seem like I was expecting kits the last time he saw me, but, like I suspected, he didn't say anything about it.

But, Frostmask's relief was short lived. As Sedgestar paused for a moment to take a breath, his tail started to move faster, going from twitching to lashing, and making Frostmask's muscles tighten in anticipation again.

"That's when Morningstar finally spoke up. He confirmed that his patrols had found a dead queen and kit near the thunderpath with ShadowClan 'reek' all over them, but he also said that that was not the only time ShadowClan scent had been found in their territory in the past couple of moons."

"What?" Frostmask blurted out, a rush of cold rippling through her pelt.

"He accused us not only of trespassing, but prey-stealing as well." Sedgestar rumbled a low growl. "When I asked if he had any proof to back up these ridiculous claims, he said that our scents-trails had been proof enough, claiming that ShadowClan scents had been picked up in their territory as recently as a quarter of a moon ago."

Frostmask went totally still, save for her heart hammering in her chest as fast as the drumming of rabbit feet.

That's the waxing half-moon. When I last met Paledusk at Fourtrees.

Frostmask's mind whirled, scrambling to pull up memories of that night.

Had she forgotten to hide her scent when she'd crossed over that narrow strip of ThunderClan land between ShadowClan's territory and Fourtrees? She couldn't recall a definitive memory of it, but masking their scents with strong smelling plants was second-nature to ShadowClan warriors— it was even used before practically every hunt! Frostmask had done it so many times in the moons since she first became an apprentice that it'd become instinct. Could she had really been so preoccupied with other things that it had slipped her mind?

But, wait...

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

That night was the one where she'd heard something behind her after she'd parted with Paledusk. Could a ThunderClan cat have seen her slinking off of their territory, but had not gotten a good enough look at her to identify her by name?

Nausea rose up in the back of Frostmask's throat, making her feel ill.

The other clans are still mad that Sedgestar made me, a rogue, deputy. And, Paledusk told me that Morningstar was already being pressured to turn on ShadowClan at the last gathering. Could some ThunderClan cat have seen me leaving their territory, and that was what pushed Morningstar over the edge? Did I turn ThunderClan against us too? Is

this entire mess all my fault?

Sedgestar released another growl, although this one sounded more frustrated than angry, his tail still sweeping from side to side.

"I denied any wrongdoing by ShadowClan, of course. But, truthfully, I don't know what to think of it," he confessed. "I would not think Morningstar would be the type of cat to lie about such a thing. And, if he were to be lying, I don't see what he'd gain by turning ThunderClan against us."

"Especially after we've done so much for him," Frostmask spoke up quickly.

Despite the anxiety whirling in her, she couldn't just sit in silent, frozen dismay; it would look too suspicious.

"We've been their closest ally for seasons," she continued. "Fennelstar may be too ill now to cause trouble, but I doubt their problems with SkyClan are over."

Sedgestar nodded. "Exactly."

"Do you think that maybe Willowstar or Rabbitstar could be pressuring him into it?" Frostmask asked, recalling her conversation with Paledusk. "Could Morningstar have been convinced that ShadowClan has been... taking advantage of ThunderClan, somehow?"

Sedgestar's brow furrowed deeply.

"I wouldn't put such a scheme past Willowstar or Rabbitstar," he said. "But, could Morningstar be persuaded to lie without hard evidence against ShadowClan? ...It just doesn't make much sense to me. Morningstar is such an honest cat."

Frostmask's mouth turned dry as anxiety squeezed her chest even more tightly than before.

"Then... do you think he's not lying? Could one of our clan-mates have been trespassing in ThunderClan's territory?" she asked in a low voice.

It almost physically pained her to ask the question which could incriminate herself, but Frostmask knew that it was a possibility that Sedgestar would want to explore. *Not* bringing it up might seem more suspicious.

Sedgestar glanced over at her, and even in the deep darkness of the den, Frostmask could still see thoughts darting in his eyes. Her heart pounded harder, but she kept her expression steady.

"Do you have any reason to believe that someone may have gone on to ThunderClan's territory multiple times in the past two moons? Besides the time you and Autumnleap went to rescue the kits?" Sedgestar asked.

Frostmask's ears twisted back as she heard the hidden layer to his words. Sedgestar asked the question in the same sort of way a mentor might question a wayward apprentice: *'If you know something, come clean now, and you'll be in less trouble than if it comes out later.'*

Frostmask shook her head.

"No," she said without hesitation, her voice low, and Sedgestar sighed softly.

"I don't have any reason to think so either," he muttered. "Our clan-mates are loyal."

But, as he said the words, Frostmask didn't miss the worry and suspicion that flashed in his eyes, although it was for only a fraction of a moment before his expression was back under his control again.

Frostmask nodded in agreement, despite the storm of anxiety still raging in her.

She was in too deep to change course now though. Telling Sedgestar the truth, that she was the one who was trespassing on ThunderClan territory in order to get to Fourtrees to meet with Paledusk, an enemy clan's deputy, who was also her father, would implode her entire life. She could lose everything— all her friends,

Autumnleap, her kits... Especially with Dampfang and his friends against her, who would surely be calling for the harshest punishment.

What would even happen to her? Would Sedgestar allow her to explain that her intentions had never been to harm ShadowClan, and in fact, meeting with Paledusk had allowed her to learn valuable information that had *helped* ShadowClan? Or, would Sedgestar not care? Would he go as far as to exile her? What would she do then? Go crawling to Paledusk for shelter in SkyClan? But, she didn't want to be a SkyClan cat! ShadowClan was the only home she's ever known...

Frostmask snapped out of her silent spiral of panic as Sedgestar began speaking again.

"Anyway, getting back to the gathering," he continued, thankfully seeming to not notice the terror and guilt that currently gripped Frostmask as tightly as hawk's talons. "After that accusation from Morningstar, Rabbitstar dropped any pretense of civility towards us. Despite what I'd said about your kits, Rabbitstar asked me if the real reason you weren't at the gathering was because I was hiding you away since I was embarrassed about having a rogue deputy. He was relentless and aggressive. More so than I'd anticipated."

Sedgestar shook his head tiredly.

"I defended our clan, but at some point during Rabbitstar's tirades, the clouds finally covered the moon and rain began to fall. The gathering was clearly over at that point, so we left."

"But there was no fighting?" Frostmask asked.

"Nothing physical," Sedgestar confirmed.

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake, trying to shove her own problems out of her mind to focus on ShadowClan.

"But another gathering interrupted by rain..." she muttered.

"A poor omen," Sedgestar said, sighing again as he finished her thought. "Or at least, the other leaders, and Rabbitstar especially,

see it that way."

Frostmask nodded slowly, meeting her eyes to Sedgestar's. "What do we do? It sounds like Rabbitstar is itching for a fight."

Sedgestar gave a sharp exhale.

"Yes. He gets that affliction every couple of seasons," he said drily before falling quiet for a moment, his tail swishing behind him in contemplation.

"Despite Rabbitstar's threats, I don't think we should preemptively attack WindClan," Sedgestar said slowly, finally breaking the silence. "Not with our relations with the other Clans so fraught."

Frostmask nodded, seeing the wisdom in that decision. "It would make our reputation look worse to be seen as the aggressors."

"Yes. Exactly," Sedgestar meowed. "Especially because of ThunderClan's accusations this gathering."

Frostmask's ears twisted back, her worry rearing back up.

"Do you think ThunderClan could also be threat?" she asked in a low voice.

"It's possible. Even if Morningstar believes his accusations to be true with every fiber of his being, I'd hope he'd be willing to extend us some grace after ThunderClan had so much support from ShadowClan for so long... But, I don't know what he will decide."

Sedgestar gave a growl of frustration, his ears flattening. "Morningstar's being such a headache for me right now."

"So we... can't really do anything right now? About WindClan or ThunderClan?" Frostmask prompted, her stomach clenching with dismay.

"But, we don't do nothing," Sedgestar said sternly. "For now, we keep ourselves strong by eating plenty of green-leaf prey, we keep a close eye on our borders, and we keep our battle skills sharp."

Frostmask swallowed, her mouth dry.

But will that be enough?

Never in her life had ShadowClan had to face aggressors on both of their borders. If they had to fend off attacks intermittently from both WindClan *and* ThunderClan, would ShadowClan be strong enough to do so alone?

Paledusk's offer for an alliance drifted back into Frostmask's mind, and she took a deep breath, gripping the idea tightly before she could lose her nerve.

"Should we consider other options for alliances?" Frostmask asked in low voice.

Sedgestar's sharp gaze met hers as his ears pricked in surprise.

"Are you proposing an alliance with Willowstar? Or Fennelstar?" he asked.

"I'm not 'proposing' anything," Frostmask muttered quickly, dropping her eyes from his.

I can't come across as too eager for an alliance with SkyClan, or Sedgestar might get suspicious!

Frostmask's stomach tightened with nerves.

"It was just a thought that popped into my head," she continued. "I don't like the idea of ShadowClan having two aggressive clans on our borders."

Sedgestar shook his head.

"I don't like it either, but I also don't see an alliance with RiverClan or SkyClan as realistic," Sedgestar said. "Assuming that they would even be willing to put their bad blood behind them to work with us, it would not make us look favorable in ThunderClan's eyes. In fact, it would probably be the final push to completely alienate Morningstar from us."

Frostmask's ears flattened guiltily.

If we haven't lost Morningstar already because of me and my stupidity.

"Then there's of course the matter of what they'd want in return for aiding us." Sedgestar sighed, closing his eyes for a moment as if fending back a headache. "Willowstar is practically a fox in a cat's pelt. And Fennelstar's body may be ill and ailing, but his mind is as cunning as ever."

"You're right," Frostmask muttered. "I shouldn't have said anything."

Sedgestar's eyes snapped back open, trapping her gaze in his.

"No. I made you my deputy for a reason. I want to hear your thoughts," he said firmly, but then a spark of dark humor entered his amber eyes. "Things will just have to be a bit more desperate to get me to go to Willowstar or Fennelstar with my tail tucked between my legs."

Despite the guilt and worry weighing her down, that coasted a huff of bitter amusement from Frostmask.

"I don't think you'll ever tuck your tail between your legs," she muttered. "Even if things are so desperate that we need their help."

Sedgestar shook his head. "No, I would. I would do anything for ShadowClan."

"I know," Frostmask said softly before glancing to the ground, going silent for a moment.

Although she was terrified about what Sedgestar might do to her if he knew that ThunderClan's aggression against ShadowClan was her fault, she couldn't help but also feeling horribly guilty. It wasn't just guilt about how her actions may have negatively impacted ShadowClan, putting her clan-mates at risk, although there was *plenty* of that. But, Frostmask also felt guilty for keeping the information from Sedgestar specifically. Especially since she suspected that he had just gone out on a limb for her.

Frostmask inhaled a deep breath.

"By the way... I wanted to ask about the kits— Newtkit and Mistkit, I mean," she muttered, shuffling her paws. "When I first talked to you about them, about keeping them, you seemed hesitant. You said it might be bad for the Clan to let them stay. But you changed your mind."

"Yes," Sedgestar's deep voice rumbled. "Have Newtkit and Mistkit settled in well?"

With some difficultly, Frostmask made her gaze lift back up to his.

"They have. But, what I want to know is why did you let them stay?" she said, her voice a bit hoarse as she forced the words out. "Was it because of the arguments we made in their defense? Or, was it because *I* wanted them?"

Sedgestar's unreadable amber eyes flickered over her face, but then his mask slipped for just a moment as his expression softened.

"Both."

Frostmask nodded, breaking eye contact again as guilt stabbed at her even more painfully than before.

"Well, I didn't get to say it earlier, but... thank you," she murmured. "Thank you for letting them stay."

If her treachery did come out and ruin everything, she at least wanted Sedgestar to know she was truly grateful for that.

The Warning

It was foolish and irresponsible for Frostmask to even think about meeting with Paledusk, considering the fact that the last time she'd snuck to Fourtrees she'd almost been caught by a ThunderClan warrior, and by doing so, she might have single-handedly sparked a war between their clans.

But, Frostmask still found herself creeping towards Fourtrees on the night of the waning half-moon, since she also *needed* to talk to him. With ShadowClan facing so much hostility from the other Clans, Paledusk's insight into the other Clans was more valuable now than ever before, and his influence in SkyClan could be the lifeline ShadowClan needed if things got worse.

As it was right now though, things were tense, but not dire. In the quarter moon of time since the gathering, a ShadowClan patrol had returned to camp once with scratches on their pelts after getting to a scrap with a WindClan border patrol when hostility boiled over. But, the ThunderClan border was quiet, although it remained strongly marked.

Frostmask wouldn't risk stepping into ThunderClan territory tonight though— she knew better than to repeat her mistake there. She would take a longer path, using the tunnel to cross over into WindClan territory and then enter Fourtrees. Although tensions with WindClan were high as well, Rabbitstar had always disliked ShadowClan, so Frostmask cared far less about accidentally provoking him than she did about Morningstar.

Of course though, her goal as always was to remain undetected. She'd disguised her scent as thoroughly as she could this time, and she felt confident that she'd be able to use her training in stealth to avoid any WindClan cats.

But, paranoia did still have her checking ShadowClan's border with ThunderClan before she even turned her paws towards WindClan territory. Of course it had been patrolled earlier in the evening, but

it didn't hurt to check again. Frostmask sniffed down where the tree-line bordered the edge of the thunderpath, making sure ShadowClan's scent markers remained undisrupted, and she tensed as a waft of fresh ThunderClan scent entered her nostrils when she brushed past a clump of ferns.

ThunderClan has been here?!

The fur on her shoulders rose. If there were ThunderClan intruders on their territory right now, then her meeting with Paledusk would have to wait. This clearly took priority.

Frostmask crouched down, slinking after the scent. She strained her eyes and ears for any hint of intruders, but the dark forest surrounding her was still. The scent meandered a bit down the border before finally turning back towards the thunderpath. There the scent vanished, masked by the thunderpath's reek as whoever the intruder was crossed back into their own territory.

Frostmask straightened, her tail lashing as she glared across the quiet thunderpath, but there was no sight of movement or flash of reflective eyes on the other side.

What is this? A ThunderClan cat just wanders onto our territory... for what reason? Just to mock us?

Frostmask's lip twitched in irritation as she restrained a snarl, but she gave her ears a shake, knocking away her anger. After all, she should try to give ThunderClan some grace if this aggression from them was ultimately caused by her, right?

I'll keep this border crossing to myself for now. Maybe it was just some kind of reckless apprentice coming over here on a dare. One scent barely over the border with no trace of prey-stealing isn't such a grievous crime... but we should definitely still keep a close eye on them.

Determining that there was no more traces of ThunderClan scent that she missed, Frostmask finally left the border to approach closer to Fourtrees. There she entered into the musty smelling tunnel, padding through puddles in the pitch blackness until she could feel heather scented air stirring her whiskers. Cautiously poking her

head out, she emerged onto WindClan territory.

Frostmask had never had any reason to use this part of the tunnel before, so she was careful in assessing the new territory it brought her to. The tunnel opened up under a low gorse bush, which seemed effective in hiding the entrance from WindClan warriors, but it meant Frostmask had to scramble out from under it with her belly pressed flat against the ground and biting back curses as thorns snagged on her pelt.

Once she was outside the bush, the open moor sprawled out in front of her, long yellow grasses swaying in the breeze. But, she turned away from the heart of WindClan territory, instead looking over her shoulder to where Fourtrees loomed not too far from here. Frostmask glanced back at the gorse bush a final time, and reassured that there were no clumps of her fur clinging to the bush and acting like a beacon to tell WindClanners where the tunnel was, Frostmask started slinking towards Fourtrees, hiding herself among the tall grasses.

She successfully made it to the lip of the hollow, and when she peered down into Fourtrees she spotted Paledusk's white coat among the undergrowth as he waited for her. Still sticking to the shadows, she crept down the slope before finally emerging from the undergrowth as she padded up to where Paledusk was crouched under a dense patch of bracken.

Paledusk dipped his head to her in greeting.

"Hello Frostmask. I was sad to miss you at the last gathering," he meowed.

Frostmask flicked her ears as she took a seat nearby him, ducking under the fronds.

"I had other things going on," she murmured, her mind turning to Mistkit and Newtkit.

It had also been a bit more challenging to leave camp since she had kits now. Luckily there were Dewleaf, Larkfoot, and Autumnleap there to take care of them, and they hadn't questioned her too much

when she excused herself from the nursery to take a 'walk down the borders.' But, she would still have to keep her meeting with Paledusk tonight short, or else they would start to wonder what was keeping with her.

"So I heard," Paledusk responded, arching a brow meaningfully.

Frostmask shifted her weight from paw to paw. She knew that this was Paledusk's way of asking about the kits without seeming too pushy. Although of course Paledusk was smart enough to figure out that the kits weren't hers by blood, it still made Frostmask a bit uneasy to admit to anyone outside of ShadowClan that the kits were rogue-born, especially with the current situation with the other clans.

But, Paledusk doesn't care about rogue-born cats joining the clans! He'll keep the secret.

"You want to know about Mistkit and Newtkit, right?" Frostmask asked, blinking at him.

"Are those their names?" Paledusk's green eyes glinted in the faint moonlight. "Sedgestar just announced that you had a litter of two."

Frostmask nodded in response.

"Mistkit is a fine name," Paledusk continued, tilting his head to the side thoughtfully. "But 'Newt?' Those are all slimy and poisonous, no?"

Frostmask couldn't stop an affectionate purr from rumbling in her chest as Paledusk's words conjured up an image in her mind of Newtkit's small, fiercely mewing black-and-ginger form.

"Being poisonous fits her. She's feisty, although more fluffy than slimy," Frostmask said warmly.

Paledusk studied her with a curious blink. "It sounds like you've already got your paws full then."

"They're still very little though," Frostmask pointed out. "Their eyes haven't even opened yet. But, I'm sure once they can walk, *stars,* I

can't imagine the trouble they'll cause."

Paledusk's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, his brow arching again.

"It is a funny thing though..." he said in a falsely casual tone. "For a queen to give birth to kits when she was never pregnant."

Frostmask gave a brief sigh. Paledusk had apparently run out of patience with her for not answering his real question already.

"Alright, I'll tell you what happened," she said without anymore delay, flexing her toes anxiously into the damp ground. "The kits aren't mine by blood. Do you remember Sedgestar saying at the gathering that ShadowClan found a dead queen and kit at the thunderpath between our territory and ThunderClan's? We found them there. The kits needed someone to care for them, so Autumnleap and I took them in. But, we told the other clans that they were born to me because everyone has their tails in such a twist about ShadowClan having a 'rogue' as deputy. We didn't think bringing more rogue-born kits into ShadowClan would be taken well at the moment."

Paledusk nodded slowly.

"I see," he said, his brow furrowing in thought. "Well, I admire your compassion for these kits in need. I know your mother would be proud of you too."

Frostmask blinked, her chest warming slightly at the praise.

"Thank you," she murmured, dipping her head, but after a moment she lifted her eyes again to meet his so she could search his bright green gaze. "But, I do need you to promise to not tell anyone else about this. The kits' true parentage needs to remain a secret to everyone outside of ShadowClan."

Paledusk bowed his head.

"Of course. You have my word," he meowed solemnly.

Frostmask nodded, a bit of relief prickling her. She trusted

Paledusk, but it still brought her some reassurance to hear his promise out loud.

"I can't imagine the amount of stress you must be under," Paledusk continued, his voice low and vibrating with sympathy. "You are now surely so busy as a new parent, but your duties must also consume so much of your time. And, adding the other clans' hostilities on top of that... I noticed that ThunderClan and WindClan especially still seem to be on ShadowClan's back."

Frostmask sighed again, he tail swishing behind her.

"Yeah, it does worry me," she admitted. "The news I heard about the gathering... did not sound good to say the least. The warning you gave me last meeting seems to be entirely accurate."

Paledusk dipped his head.

"Although I wish that weren't the case," he muttered down at the ground before glancing back up at Frostmask. "And, how does ShadowClan fare against these threats? Have you given my offer from last time about an alliance between our clans anymore thought?"

"I have," Frostmask said with a blink. "But, I think Sedgestar wants to wait to see what Morningstar or Rabbitstar will do, if anything."

Frostmask angled an ear towards Paledusk. "I brought the idea of an alliance with SkyClan up with him, but he doesn't trust Fennelstar, and I doubt my other clan-mates will either. Honestly, I can't blame them for that. But, I also couldn't tell him that I've been talking to *you* about the alliance, not Fennelstar."

"Indeed," Paledusk said in his deep rumble.

Frostmask shook her head, anxiety trickling into her. "So, I fear that unless something escalates, Sedgestar will not look for an alliance."

Paledusk's brow furrowed.

"One can only hope that by the time he decides ShadowClan *is* in need of an ally, it's not already too late," he muttered darkly.

Frostmask bowed her head, his words stirring up the worst-case scenario in her mind.

"Exactly," she said in a low voice.

Paledusk exhaled a long breath.

"Well know that SkyClan is here, if anything changes," he said.

"Thank you," Frostmask said, blinking at him gratefully. "I really appreciate that."

"Of course." Paledusk gave a gentle blink in response. "It sounds like you and ShadowClan need all the support that you can get. Especially since you don't just have your own safety to worry about now, but your kits' as well. It must be difficult."

Frostmask's ears angled back.

"They've barely been here a quarter moon, and it's already been hard," she agreed with a sigh. "Even convincing ShadowClan to keep them was hard. Not all of my clan-mates loved the idea of it."

Paledusk nodded.

"I suspected as much. That one warrior..." Paledusk's gaze narrowed thoughtfully. "It's 'Dampfang,' right? Is he still causing trouble?"

Frostmask rolled her eyes with a bitter huff of amusement.

"When isn't he?" she meowed drily. "He was the biggest in favor of getting rid of the kits by dropping them off at ThunderClan, or with twolegs, or something..."

Paledusk's ears flicked uneasily.

"That is concerning," he muttered. "And, others agree with him?"

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

"Maybe a few?" she said as she tried to recall who else spoke out that day.

She was pretty sure Marshnose had agreed with Dampfang, but she was having trouble remembering other names.

"Although, none were as vehement as him," she continued with a dismissive flick of her ears. "Dampfang has a particular hatred for me. But, most of my clan-mates seem fine with it. Or, they just don't care much either way."

Paledusk stared at her, his face still creased in a frown.

"So, you think that the kits will be safe there?" he asked, his tone deep and serious.

Frostmask's ears started to flatten down against her head, and her stomach twisted uneasily at the implication in Paledusk's voice. He couldn't be saying what she thought he was, right?

"My clan-mates, for the most part, are good cats," Frostmask insisted. "Not even Dampfang would attack or injure a kit."

"Of course," Paledusk muttered, dipping his head slightly in concession. "I did not mean that. But... a misplaced word at the gathering. Or, a rant in a voice too loud on the border patrol... After all, a clan is an awful large group of cats to keep a secret."

Frostmask's eyes widened, surprise hitting her as she finally understood Paledusk's meaning.

"You think one of my clan-mates could deliberately let it slip to the other clans that Mistkit and Newtkit aren't clan-born?" she asked, staring at him in shock.

Paledusk was silent for a moment, his tail swishing as he deliberated.

"Maybe unintentionally, but maybe not..." he murmured finally. "But, it certainly seems possible, doesn't it?"

Frostmask chewed on her lip nervously as her mind whirled, playing out the scenarios.

"No..." she muttered, but the word didn't sound as certain as she

wished it would. "None of my clan-mates would put the kits, and the entirety of ShadowClan, at risk like that. No one would do it on purpose."

Paledusk arched a brow.

"Well, how much does Dampfang hate you?" he asked simply. "How much does he want your kits gone?"

Frostmask's stomach clenched, painful and cold like she'd swallowed a huge block of ice.

Dampfang does really hate me, and he doesn't want my kits there. And, he's angry right now since Pineshade dumped him... Could that make him so reckless that he'd do something like this? But, he cares so much about ShadowClan, or, at least, he claims to, and provoking the other clans into attacking wouldn't just hurt me, but everyone.

Paledusk gazed at her as Frostmask silently argued with herself in her mind. He must have been able to read the torment in her expression because he blinked at her sympathetically.

"I just worry about you," he murmured, dipping his head. "You're a kind cat, and it seems like you try to see the good in others. But, others have taken advantage of that goodness before. How could we forget what Sedgestar did to you— betraying you when you'd been nothing but a loyal warrior to him in return?"

Paledusk sadly shook his ears.

"If your own leader could do such a thing, who's to say that Dampfang, a cat who by your own attestation hates you, or any one of your other clan-mates, couldn't do the same? Or something *worse?"*

"I don't know," Frostmask muttered in an unsteady voice, her claws flexing in and out of the damp earth beneath her.

She'd like to think that Sedgestar was truly regretful about his actions, that he'd put it all behind them and wouldn't do something like that again. But, how did she know that for sure? And, Paledusk was right about Dampfang. How did she know that he wasn't

capable of doing something even more terrible than what Sedgestar did?

Frostmask found her mouth suddenly dry when she tried to swallow. Nausea rose in her gut, but she did her best to push it, and her mounting anxiety, back down, screwing her eyes shut and inhaling a deep breath. A moment later, Frostmask felt the plumy touch of Paledusk's tail against her side as he brushed it against her flank in gentle support.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to upset you so much. I just hope that you know what you're doing. That the kits will be safe in ShadowClan, around cats like Dampfang, and that you've chosen well to raise them with Autumnleap—"

Frostmask jolted in surprise, her eyes snapping open.

Autumnleap?

"What?" Frostmask meowed suddenly, cutting Paledusk off. "What does Autumnleap have to do with anything?"

She lifted her gaze back to Paledusk's, her brow furrowing. Paledusk blinked down at her, and one of his ears twitched in uncertainty.

"Autumnleap is your mate, isn't he? And, you're raising the kits with him?" he clarified.

Frostmask nodded in response.

"Yes, well," Paledusk continued, glancing away from her. "All I was saying is that I hope you judged his character well."

Frostmask set her jaw as the nebulous feelings of deep anxiety and distress that had been swirling around in her stomach and chest crystalized into a more concrete emotion of upset and offense.

How could Paledusk question Autumnleap's character like that?

Frostmask drew away from the touch of his tail.

"Autumnleap is already a good father," she said, bristling a bit as

she came to her mate's defense. "He wouldn't ever do anything that could put our kits at risk."

Paledusk bowed his head.

"I'm sorry," he murmured again. "I don't want to upset you anymore. I do not know him that well. It is certainly possible that I misjudged him and spoke out of turn."

You did.

But, Frostmask bit her tongue against the words. Paledusk just seemed concerned; he probably didn't mean to insult her or Autumnleap.

"It's fine," Frostmask muttered, glancing away from him. "I just don't know why you would have said something like that without any proof."

"Well..." Paledusk began slowly, but his voice trailed off a moment later.

Frostmask turned her gaze back over at him, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"'Well' what?" she asked.

Paledusk shifted his weight from one paw to the other. He sighed deeply.

"I don't wish to continue to upset you. We don't have to keep talking about it," he meowed.

"You keep saying that, and yet here we are, still talking about it," Frostmask said, a scathing edge creeping into her voice.

Paledusk stiffened suddenly, his ears half-folding back, and a stab of regret pierced through Frostmask's irritation.

I shouldn't have spoken so rudely to him.

Frostmask sighed, trying to expel her anger in her breath, and the

taunt muscles in her neck and shoulders loosened.

"I'm sorry. Just tell me," Frostmask said in a much more even tone.

Paledusk stared at her, hesitating for a few moments.

"...Very well," he said finally. "It's just that... Autumnleap doesn't know about me, right?"

Frostmask's brow creased in confusion.

"No one knows about you," she muttered.

Paledusk angled his head towards her.

"Yes. But, you do have clan-mates who at least know that your father is a SkyClan cat. And, Autumnleap is not one of them, right? I just find that curious. So if Autumnleap was told that secret, you don't think that could change things for him?" Paledusk asked, blinking at her solemnly. "You don't think that it might cause him to start... *questioning* things about you?"

Frostmask's tail began to twitch, and she swallowed hard. Her mind was churning, old doubts being dredged up from the depths and brought to the surface.

She wanted to reject Paledusk's suggestions, but truthfully... he wasn't wrong. Back when she'd first found out about Paledusk, she *had* decided to keep it a secret from Autumnleap because she'd been scared of how he'd react— if he would start to doubt her like Sedgestar had. She couldn't risk losing him.

"I... Autumnleap... He isn't..." Frostmask stuttered, trying to defend herself and him.

"It's been seasons since you learned about the truth," Paledusk continued, not giving her the chance to fully form her thoughts. "And, yet you still haven't told him. Something must be holding you back, right? Do you see something deep inside him that you cannot fully trust?"

Frostmask shook her head helplessly.

"No!" she protested. "It's not that. Autumnleap is wonderful. He's so kind, and caring, and he's always stood up for me..."

Paledusk leaned forward, his suddenly intent green eyes seemingly boring into her very soul as he loomed above her.

"So what is it? What holds you back?" he pressed.

"I— I don't know!" Frostmask gasped, her ears pinning back.

Sedgestar, Redclaw, Emberflower, Beeclaw, Swoopstrike, and Grovepelt had all known that her father was a SkyClan cat. Out of them all, Redclaw, Emberflower, Grovepelt, and Beeclaw had seemingly never treated her any differently for it. Swoopstrike had been hard on her in the beginning, but he'd come around eventually. And, then of course there had been that disaster with Sedgestar... but, still, no matter how spectacular that was, all-in-all it was still five successes to one failure. Was she really just scared of Autumnleap's reaction or was there something more keeping her silent?

But, how could I tell him now, after it's been so long? Would he be able to forgive me for keeping it from him? And, if I tell him that my father is a SkyClan cat, that's still only a half-truth. Wouldn't I have to tell him everything? That it's Paledusk, and I've been meeting with him? That ThunderClan is angry because of me, because they picked up my scent on their territory when I went to meet him?

Frostmask dug her claws into the ground, her shoulders hunching as she stared down at her paws. Misery swirled in her as fiercely as a storm.

"It's not him! I'm the problem!" she growled, the words bursting from her throat. "I've messed everything up by lying so much! And, I can't tell him the truth now because if I do, everything will be ruined!"

She ground her teeth together, biting back a wail of despair. She wanted to bury her face into her paws and just disappear— sink into the earth to never be seen again.

"You've only been trying to protect yourself. There's no shame in that," Paledusk said, his voice now feather-soft, in stark contrast to the almost demanding tone he'd used only a moment earlier. "If anyone is to blame, it is the culture of the clans themselves. That is what has cultivated such hostility towards non clan-born cats like yourself."

Despite Paledusk's reassurances, Frostmask's belly still clenched in guilt. He was right that the attitude of the clans made things hard for her, but it had still been her decision not to tell Autumnleap. How could she blame that choice on anyone else? And it had also been her decision to meet with Paledusk, and continue to meet with him despite the risks, digging herself deeper and deeper into her hole of lies.

Had this finally gone on long enough? Should she stop now before she ended up even deeper? Especially since ThunderClan's hostility was because of her scent on their land... It had been one thing when she only put herself at risk, but now her actions could threaten all of ShadowClan as well.

Frostmask forced her eyes back up to Paledusk.

"Maybe we should stop meeting," she rasped in a low voice. "Maybe it's causing too much trouble for me."

Paledusk's eyes flashed in brief moment of surprise.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his face screwing up in consternation. "You think this arrangement no longer benefits both our clans? Even though ShadowClan could soon be facing a war?"

Frostmask's tail fidgeted uneasily, and she didn't immediately respond.

"You know, stopping our meetings isn't going to change the fact that you haven't told Autumnleap the truth," Paledusk pointed out gently, lowing his chin so that they were at eye-level.

His dazzling, confident green gaze burned into her soft, fragile blue. "It won't alleviate any of your guilt— just perhaps make it easier to

ignore, by ignoring me. That might make you feel better for a time, but it is not the solution to your problems."

Frostmask lowered her eyes back to the ground, her neck fur prickling.

He's right. I caused this mess, so I'm the only one who can solve it. And, meeting Paledusk doesn't have to provoke ThunderClan further— I could go through WindClan territory like I did today, or change our meeting spot to some place else that doesn't involve me crossing ThunderClan land. So driving Paledusk away won't really fix anything...

"...You're right," Frostmask sighed, closing her eyes for a moment as she spoke her thoughts out loud. "It won't solve anything."

They were both silent for a few heartbeats. Frostmask spent the moments trying to shove down her guilt and misery with little success.

"I should leave soon," she murmured finally. "I have kits now. The queens and Autumnleap will notice if I'm gone too long."

"I understand," Paledusk said in a deep rumble. "Do you still wish to meet again in a moon? At the next waning half-moon?"

Frostmask rose to her paws, exhaling a long breath.

"I'll try," she said. "But if tensions continue to rise between us and ThunderClan and WindClan, it may become more difficult for me to get to Fourtrees unnoticed."

Paledusk blinked hard, his ears perking up as if he was suddenly reminded of something.

"Speaking of..." he said in a low voice. "Before you go, I have another warning for you."

Frostmask clenched her jaw.

Another warning? As if I need more stress and bad news!

Frostmask took a deep breath, bracing herself.

"What is it?" she asked.

Paledusk's brow was troubled as he gazed at her.

"It's something that I heard last gathering whispered between Wheatfur and Acornear," he rumbled. "I couldn't catch it all, but it was doubtless some kind of an agreement... I think an alliance may have been forged between WindClan and ThunderClan against ShadowClan."

Frostmask's heart dropped down to her stomach. That sort of alliance was exactly one of the things that she feared most.

"And, you're sure you haven't misheard?" Frostmask demanded a bit desperately.

Paledusk shook his head sadly. "I don't believe so."

Fear and anxiety raged in her like a hurricane, but Frostmask inhaled a trembling breath, doing her best to steel her will and mind.

At least Paledusk has given us some kind of warning. Frostmask told herself, grasping for the silver-lining. *Now I can prepare ShadowClan for war.*

Paledusk gazed at her sympathetically, rising to his paws as well to dip his head to her in farewell.

"Remember, my offer still stands if Sedgestar changes his mind," he rumbled. "Good luck, Frostmask."

Betrayal

Although Frostmask of course couldn't tell Sedgestar about her meeting with Paledusk, it wasn't difficult for her to convince him to prepare ShadowClan for potential threats— just in case. In the couple of days since her meeting with the SkyClan deputy, Frostmask had already increased the number of patrols on the borders with WindClan and ThunderClan, and the warriors who weren't hunting or patrolling had been ordered to spend their time brushing up on their battle training.

She may not be able to tell her clan-mates about Paledusk's warning, but she would absolutely make sure that they would be ready to face it, if his premonition did come to pass.

But, despite all the ShadowClan cats scurrying around their territory like a disturbed hive of bees, as the mid-morning sun crept higher into the sky, Frostmask found herself still in camp. Although, her paws remained as busy as anyone else's as she wove additional thorn tendrils into the camp's wall.

Darkpelt, Rowanheart, and Yewstorm were helping her out. While Rowanheart and Yewstorm worked together, Frostmask had been paired up with Darkpelt. She caught only glimpses of the elder's black coat through the dense thorn wall as he pushed thorny sticks and stems from the outside of the camp in towards her, allowing her to weave them into the gaps on the inside as he bulked up the outer.

"Here's another," Darkpelt rumbled.

Frostmask blinked as a thorny tendril poked out of the bushes only a mouse-length away from her muzzle. She gingerly took the stem into her mouth, avoiding the thorns.

"Got it," she mumbled around the plant.

Darkpelt released his end, and Frostmask got to work weaving it

around the other stems, filling up any gaps that were big enough to rival her head in size. Frostmask had just finished with that stem when a flash of auburn fur in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She glanced over to see that Autumnleap had just emerged from the nursery, his reddish pelt gleaming in the sunlight. He yawned widely, his body pitching forward as he stretched each of his hind-legs out from behind him one at a time.

Frostmask's belly flipped with nerves, and she glanced away from him, back to the thorn wall, before he could look around and notice her watching him.

Paledusk's words about Autumnleap had dug deep into her mind since their meeting like a stubborn tick that, no matter what she did, she couldn't pull off. They had plagued her thoughts everyday since then, and no matter how many times she turned them over and over in her mind, she couldn't discard them. But, she also couldn't find any good solution.

Frankly, it terrified her.

She wanted so desperately to convince herself that Paledusk was wrong, that Autumnleap wouldn't cast her aside if he knew the truth about her. Or, if she couldn't convince herself of that, she'd at least like to forget that this conversation with Paledusk had ever happened— just bury it in the depths of her mind with her other doubts and leave them all there in the darkness as she went on, doing other, more important things, and pretending like they didn't even exist at all.

Frostmask lashed her tail once in frustration. Why couldn't the solution be that simple? She'd been ignoring them perfectly fine before she spoke with Paledusk! Why did he have to say something about it, and ruin her perfectly good delusion?!

But, that's just it, the vicious doubts whispered in her mind. *That's all that it's ever been with Autumnleap— a delusion. You don't seriously think that it could be anything else, right? His devotion to you? This 'perfect little family' you have now with Mistkit and Newtkit? It's all built on a fabrication. He doesn't even know who you truly are or what you've done. If he did, why would he still love you?*

Frostmask shook her ears, trying to knock the horrible thoughts away.

He loves Mistkit and Newtkit even though they weren't born in ShadowClan!

This isn't about being non-clan born, the voice argued back. *This is about Paledusk, and SkyClan, and* ***lying.*** *You're just a coward. A pathetic little rogue coward who would rather lie to her mate, and her friends, and her clan than deal with anything difficult.*

Frostmask ground her teeth together, her heart clenching in pain and guilt. She wanted to wail, but she just inhaled and exhaled a deep breath instead, reminding herself that she was sitting in camp, too surrounded by her clan-mates to break down. As Frostmask breathed in deeply again, she did her best to squash down that terrible part of her mind and to think rationally, despite the maelstrom of emotions that still raged inside her.

But, is there anything I can do to fix this?! The only way to change things is to tell him the truth, but if I tell him the truth, then he might not want anything do with me! That would be the worst thing that could ever happen!

Worse than this? another part of her mind responded, although this reply was much gentler than the ones before. *Worse than knowing that you're living a lie? Than knowing that your family could be built on a lie?*

Frostmask's ears flattened down as icy resignation settled in the pit of her stomach.

There was no more escaping this, was there? If she couldn't ignore it any longer, then there was nothing left to do but to face it... Nothing left to do but to tell him.

Frostmask swallowed hard. Her mouth was suddenly dry, but dread was making her paw-pads damp with perspiration.

Today might be the day that I ruin my life.

Frostmask closed her eyes, steeling herself. If she was going to do

this, she might as well get it over with instead of dragging the pain on for even longer.

"Darkpelt, I'm going to out into the woods and get some more thorny branches. I won't be too long," she said.

Darkpelt acknowledged her with a muffled grunt as he continued working diligently on the barrier. Frostmask's gaze flickered back open, and she rose to her paws with all the reluctance of a cat knowingly entering into a doomed battle. Still, she tried to maintain a scrap of dignity, keeping her steps steady as she marched across camp over to Autumnleap.

"Oh, hey Frostmask," he purred as he noticed her approaching. "Dewleaf is nursing Mistkit and Newtkit right now, so I'm just taking a bit of a break... um... Are you okay?"

Autumnleap stared down at her with a furrowed brow, obviously picking up on her weird mood. He knew her too well for Frostmask to effectively hide her emotions from him. She knew that he'd noticed her acting withdrawn for the past couple of days too, although he hadn't pressed her on it too much so far.

Well, he'll know everything soon enough.

"Will you come gather more thorns with me?" Frostmask asked in a quiet, stiff voice. "I want to talk to you."

Autumnleap blinked, his amber eyes shining with concern.

"Of course," he said.

Frostmask just nodded and turned, leading him out of camp. They walked through the pines in silence for a while, Autumnleap trailing a footfall behind Frostmask as if he sensed some kind of heavy, dark fog swirling around her, and he didn't want to come too close to it. Frostmask wished that they could just pad on like that for forever, but there was no sense in delaying the inevitable anymore than she already had. Taking another deep breath, Frostmask came to a stop in a part of the woods that wasn't highly trafficked. She could hear Autumnleap's quiet footfalls slow and

then pause from behind her as he waited for her.

Exhaling a shaky breath, Frostmask finally turned to look at him, and she found a choked sob-like noise suddenly rising in her throat.

"Oh! Frostmask, what's wrong?" Autumnleap asked, his eyes round as he took a worried step towards her.

He scanned her body with his gaze as if looking for physical injuries, but of course that wasn't the problem. Frostmask drew back from him a step, keeping some distance between them, and that just made the concern in Autumnleap's expression grow. But, he allowed her the space, a deep furrow in his brow.

Any dignity that Frostmask had been clinging to in her resignation had vanished, and now her powerful emotions were conquering her again, washing away everything and leaving only panic, guilt, and grief behind.

"What is it?" Autumnleap prompted again, his tone gentle.

"I—just—" Frostmask said, struggling to get the words out as she found herself suddenly hiccuping between gasps of air. "I—don't want—you—t-t-to—*hate* me."

Autumnleap stared at her with wide eyes.

"Why would I hate you, Frostmask?" His voice was as soft as if he was talking to a kit. "I could never hate you."

"Ev—even if I did something terrible?" Frostmask asked, swallowing hard around the lump in her throat.

Autumnleap lifted his brows.

"Did you kill Poolcloud?" Autumnleap asked.

Frostmask blinked hard, recoiling slightly at the absurdity of the question and the deeply unpleasant mental image it invoked.

"No! Of course not," Frostmask gasped.

"Pineshade?" Autumnleap prodded.

"That's horrible! Don't ever say that!" Frostmask said, glaring at him.

Autumnleap gave his head a shake, a quiet purr beginning to rumble in his throat.

"I'm just trying to make a point. Whatever you did can't be that bad." Autumnleap gazed at her with gentle eyes. "I know you, Frostmask. You're not capable of doing something truly 'terrible.'"

Frostmask blinked hard, her ears pinning back.

"...But what if you don't?" she asked, her voice barely above a breath.

Autumnleap blinked in confusion.

"What if I don't what?" he asked.

"What if you don't know me," Frostmask whispered, her eyes starting to glisten with despair.

Autumnleap shook his head.

"Don't be ridiculous. I've known you practically your whole life. How can I not know you?" he asked.

"I'm half-SkyClan," Frostmask blurted.

Silence filled the air for a moment. Frostmask stared at Autumnleap desperately, looking for fury or betrayal in his expression, but his eyes just widened in surprise.

"What? What do you mean?" he asked.

Dread dragged at Frostmask's belly. It was clear her declaration hadn't properly set in yet, but once it did, that was when the anger and suspicion would come. She didn't want to continue— didn't want to see the dawning realization creep across his face— but she couldn't take it back now either.

"My mother, May," Frostmask rasped, the words weighing down her tongue like a stone in her mouth, "she was a rogue. But, my father... He was a SkyClan cat... *is* a SkyClan cat."

Autumnleap blinked once, confusion and worry starting to mingle together in his amber eyes.

"Okay..." he said slowly. "Do you know who he is?"

Frostmask gave a tiny nod.

"The deputy. Paledusk," she said, her voice catching in her throat.

Autumnleap blinked hard a few times again, his eyelids fluttering. His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

"And, you..." he rasped. "And, do you... want to join SkyClan?"

"What? No!" Frostmask gasped, recoiling from him.

"You don't?" Autumnleap gasped, relief flooding his face.

"Of course not! I'm a ShadowClan cat!" Frostmask hissed, agony welling in her chest. "I'm loyal to ShadowClan, and I could never leave you or our kits!"

It was just as she feared— Autumnleap thought she would betray ShadowClan, just like Sedgestar did when he accused her, just like Swoopstrike did when she first became his apprentice.

Frostmask dug her claws into the ground, pain ripping razor-sharp claws in her insides. How would she manage to survive without Autumnleap's love and friendship?

"Well what did you expect me to think when you dragged me out here, being all weird and grave like... like someone died!" Autumnleap exclaimed, but he didn't sound all that angry, in fact, the predominant expression on his face was nothing but relief. *"Great StarClan,* Frostmask! Next time you need to tell me something that's not that serious, don't start the conversation with a bunch of preamble that makes me think something truly awful was happening!"

"'Not that serious?'" Frostmask echoed, blinking hard in stunned shock. "You're... you're not mad?"

"I'm a little annoyed that you nearly scared the pelt off of me," Autumnleap admitted with a huff, giving his fur a small shake. "But, mad at you for telling me that you're half-SkyClan? No."

"You're not?" Frostmask reiterated, her heart slowly starting to lighten.

Autumnleap gazed at her with confusion.

"Why would I be? Paledusk may have nearly killed me, but I can't blame you for anything he's done— you have no control over him. And, you're not leaving to join SkyClan, so it doesn't change anything, right?" he asked.

Frostmask's ears flattened back down against her head. This may be going better than expected so far, but Autumnleap still didn't know *everything,* or he didn't understand the full extent of it yet.

"Yeah, but I've kept it from you," she muttered, the confession sticking in her throat. "I've known about it for moons now, and I didn't tell you because... well I thought you might hate me. Or, distrust me and think that I might betray ShadowClan."

Autumnleap's ears twisted back. He blinked hard a few times, and that's when the realization finally started to dawn in his expression.

"Wait... you've known about this for... for moons?" he echoed in a soft voice.

Frostmask's stomach twisted at the hesitance in his tone. She searched Autumnleap's gaze, and she saw a look of hurt flickering in his eyes.

"...I guess I assumed that you just found out recently, which was why you were telling me about it now," he mumbled in a low voice, seemingly half to himself.

Guilt jabbed deep in Frostmask's chest, and as Autumnleap's eyes focused on her again, his brow furrowed.

"Do other cats know?"

Frostmask swallowed.

"The cats on the patrol that found me and May... Sedgestar, Emberflower, Beeclaw know that my father is a SkyClan cat. May told them that, although she didn't tell them *who.* Sedgestar told Redclaw, and Grovepelt and Swoopstrike knew as well, back when they were alive. But, Sedgestar made them all swear not to tell anyone, and especially not *me*. He didn't want my loyalties divided."

Autumnleap's tail swished, half in agitation and half in confusion. "So how did you find out? And, how do you know it's Paledusk?"

Frostmask sighed, shifting her weight from paw to paw. "Sedgestar eventually told me the truth himself. Do you remember when SkyClan attacked the camp, invading our territory through the tunnel, and Sedgestar accused me of telling SkyClan about the tunnel?"

Autumnleap's eyes widened in understanding.

"So that's why he thought you did it," he mumbled. "...And why you were so upset."

Frostmask nodded.

"After that... I figured out it was Paledusk by myself, using some clues that I had noticed," she continued. "But, you're the only one I've told who knows that it's Paledusk. No one else in ShadowClan knows that he's my father."

Autumnleap's gaze narrowed slightly.

"No one else in ShadowClan?" he echoed. "But, does someone else know? Does *Paledusk* know?"

Frostmask's ears pinned back against her skull, shame burning her pelt. She bowed her head, unable to hold Autumnleap's gaze.

"Paledusk knows," she murmured in a low voice. "I've spoken to him, and even met with him outside of gatherings... and I know that

sounds bad, but I swear I've never put ShadowClan secrets in danger. I just wanted to get to know him and my mother better. Surely you can't blame me for being curious about my kin, right? And, he's turned out to be useful too. He has insights into SkyClan and the other clans that we don't in ShadowClan."

Autumnleap was silent for a few moments, and Frostmask forced her gaze back up to his. His brow was furrowed deeply, his gaze flickering over Frostmask's pelt as if he suddenly saw a strange hue in her fur that he'd never noticed before.

"This... is a lot, Frostmask," he meowed finally.

He didn't sound furious, but he clearly wasn't pleased either. His tail fidgeted with a restless energy, and he was avoiding Frostmask's gaze. He closed his eyes, exhaling a sharp sigh.

"I understand your reasons, but... it still hurts knowing that you couldn't trust me with this," he muttered. "We're supposed to be partners. But, you haven't been treating me like an equal. Instead you've been lying to me for moons."

"I know," Frostmask rasped, half-crouching in apology as her heart clenched. "All I can say is that I'm sorry. I know that's not enough, but I am so sorry."

Autumnleap's eyes opened, his gaze focusing on her again. His ears angled back as the first appearance of anger crept into his expression.

"I can't believed that you trusted *Paledusk,* SkyClan's deputy, more than you trusted me," he added, his voice low, almost a growl.

"No," Frostmask rasped quickly, desperate to make him understand. "I didn't trust Paledusk— at least, not at first. The only reason that I started talking with him, met with him, was that I knew that he couldn't say anything about it. He didn't want his clan-mates to know about me as much as I didn't want ShadowClan to know about him. If Paledusk ever betrayed me, I'd ruin him in return."

"You say that like it makes you secretly meeting with him better!"

Autumnleap snapped, his voice rising. "He's SkyClan's deputy, and you're ShadowClan's, Frostmask! You must see how terrible that looks! Not only have you been lying to me for moons, but you've put yourself in danger!"

Frostmask flinched at his harsh tone, and Autumnleap immediately froze before his body language softened.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, angling his head away from her. "I didn't mean to shout. I think I just need some time to think about this."

Autumnleap started to turn aside, and Frostmask took a couple sudden jerky steps towards him, panic sparking off her pelt.

"'Time to think?' What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means to give me some space, Frostmask," Autumnleap said, some impatience edging his tone as he glanced back at her from over his shoulder. "I've done the same for you before. Now you need to return the favor."

With a swish of his tail, he glanced away. "I'll see you later."

He padded off, and Frostmask watched him go, her belly churning with utter despair and misery.

Paledusk was right. Oh why did I say anything? Hopefully Autumnleap will still at least care about me enough to agree not to tell anyone else the truth... But what if he ***does*** *tell everyone? What will happen to me? What will Sedgestar do to me?*

Frostmask clenched her jaw, unable to answer her questions. Resigning herself to her fate, Frostmask's paws dragged against the ground as she plodded back to the camp.

She did return with thorny stems and branches as she'd told Darkpelt, but she only half-heartedly worked on the barrier for a bit longer before excusing herself for the nursery. It was quiet in the den. Amberberry, Dewleaf and their litters were playing out in camp, so only Larkfoot remained inside with Newtkit and Mistkit. Both of them were still too young to play, although they were growing more active by the day, and Larkfoot had said that she

expected that their eyes would likely open very soon.

But right now, as if sensing Frostmask's dark mood, Larkfoot didn't try to chat with her. She only gave a gentle purr as Frostmask took her place in the nest and then the senior queen left the den, leaving Frostmask alone with her kits. Frostmask dipped her head, breathing in Newtkit's and Mistkit's warm scents as the two burrowed into her fur, letting out soft, happy mewls at her appearance. Frostmask screwed her eyes shut, her heart clenching in equal parts love and pain.

Please StarClan, no matter what happens to me if Autumnleap chooses to tell everyone, let Mistkit and Newtkit remain safe in ShadowClan.

As the morning wore on, Frostmask stayed in the den, silently guarding her kittens as they napped when a sudden yowl from outside caught her attention. Her head jerked up, her pelt rippling with fear.

Is that Autumnleap coming back to tell everyone?

Nausea rising in her stomach, Frostmask forced herself to her paws and slunk out of the den. But, the sight that greeted her wasn't at all what she'd expected. It wasn't Autumnleap, but Pineshade returning from her WindClan border patrol, her fur prickling and her tail whipping. The scent of blood rushed into Frostmask's nostrils, and Frostmask jolted in worry as she noticed her friend's dark pelt was splattered with it. But that was nothing compared to the amount of red that clumped in Snakeeyes' white fur when she came staggering into the camp, her mismatched eyes glazed, supported by Leafbreeze on one side and Murmurstep on the other.

"Elmclaw!" Pineshade yowled. *"Elmclaw!"*

"What happened?!" Frostmask demanded, haring over to them as the medicine cat's head poked out from his den, his eyes widening as he took in the sight.

"WindClan happened!" Pineshade spat, turning her attention onto Frostmask.

Her amber eye was alight with golden fire as her spiky-furred tail lashed from side to side.

"While we were patrolling, the snake-hearts ambushed us two to one with a battle patrol!" she continued with a snarl, curling her claws into the ground.

Frostmask's eyes widened, her neck fur prickling.

When Autumnleap left, he was headed in the direction of the WindClan border! Oh StarClan, please let him be alright!

Elmclaw had reached Snakeeyes now with a clump of cobwebs in his jaws. He gently nudged her to the ground and started pressing the cobwebs to her wounds to staunch the bleeding. Icy fear gushed through Frostmask as she took in the sight of her friend lying so still on the ground. The commotion had attracted all of her clan-mates who were in camp out into the clearing, although Larkfoot, Dewleaf and Amberberry were ushering the kits into the nursery to keep them from being underfoot. When the elders emerged from their den, Greytail let out a warbling wail as she caught sight of her injured daughter, and Clearstream pressed her flank reassuringly to her side. Rowanheart and Yewstorm had also abandoned their tasks with the thorn barrier and rushed to Snakeeyes, but they hovered a few tail-lengths back from her, giving Elmclaw the space to work.

"Will she be okay?!" Rowanheart demanded, his voice cracking as he stared down at his mate with wide, panic-stricken eyes. "Snakeeyes? Can you hear me?"

Elmclaw was too focused on his task to respond, and Snakeeyes didn't either, although her flanks still rose and fell with breath. Yewstorm pressed his muzzle to his father's side supportively, but Frostmask could see his silver-and-black striped legs trembling.

"Is WindClan on their way here?" Sedgestar's commanding voice suddenly cut in as he strode over to the group. "Have they invaded our territory?"

Pineshade shook her head.

"I don't think so," Murmurstep spoke up in a quiet voice. "They just seemed to be harrying us at the borders."

"The mouse-hearts," Pineshade added furiously.

"That's good," Sedgestar gave a curt nod, "but still we should ensure that they are not on our land."

He glanced around at the cats in camp. Sunhigh was approaching and more cats would start to return soon from their hunts, patrols, and training, but as of right now, there weren't many warriors around. Besides Yewstorm and Rowanheart, there was only Kestrelmoon, Cricketsong, Beeclaw, and Dampfang.

"Beeclaw, take a patrol with Kestrelmoon, Yewstorm, and Cricketsong to go investigate the border. Report back if WindClan is still at the border, or if you find them in our territory. But, don't engage without backup," Sedgestar ordered.

"I can go too and show them were we were attacked," Leafbreeze spoke up, taking a step forward. "I got lucky and didn't get that injured— only a few scratches."

Sedgestar nodded. "Very well. Go."

The patrol of cats streamed out of camp, and Frostmask watched them leave, her paws tingling anxiously. Hopefully they would be able to help out Autumnleap, or any of her other clan-mates out there in the forest, if any of them did end up in a fight with WindClan. Frostmask closed her eyes for a moment.

It's finally starting— all the horrible things Paledusk warned me about. But, this was just one skirmish, and Snakeeyes is already so badly injured... How much worse will it get from here?

Elmclaw continued to work on Snakeeyes as Sedgestar got a more detailed report of what had happened from Pineshade and Murmurstep. Frostmask tried to listen too— she knew it was important— but her miserable, anxious thoughts kept distracting her. She at least heard the fact that Rabbitstar had led the battle patrol himself.

"Okay," Elmclaw finally said, exhaling sharply.

The sound of his voice snapped Frostmask back to attention and cut Pineshade off mid-sentence. No one seemed to mind though as every gaze turned to stare at him as they waited for his assessment of Snakeeyes.

"I think I've stopped the bleeding enough that I can move her to my den now," Elmclaw said, rising to his paws.

Since Elmclaw had finally stopped pouring over Snakeeyes' wounds, Rowanheart was able to crouch down by his now completely unconscious mate, giving her forehead a few gentle licks.

"Will she be okay?" Rowanheart asked again in a softer, but far more despondent voice as he lifted his green eyes to Elmclaw.

Elmclaw's gaze hardened when he met his friend's eyes.

"I won't lose her," he swore, a growl almost rumbling under his words.

Rowanheart blinked, giving a tiny, hopeful nod.

With Rowanheart's help, Elmclaw carefully lifted Snakeeyes, and they started carrying her towards the medicine cat's den in Clanrock. As they did so, the thorn barrier rustled. Dustleap emerged from the tunnel with Marshnose, Cedarfur, Poolcloud, and Lizardstrike, all ladened with prey from their hunt.

As soon as Lizardstrike spotted his mother, though, his blue eyes welled with terror. He dropped his prey to the ground right then and there and sprinted over to Rowanheart and Elmclaw as they carried her. Lizardstrike started paw-signing immediately, bombarding Rowanheart with questions about what happened, but Rowanheart was still too busy carrying Snakeeyes to respond. He just signaled for Lizardstrike to follow him with a flick of his tail, and they all disappeared into the medicine cat's den.

Frostmask blinked, pulling her focus back to Pineshade as she finished her report to the now larger group of cats. Her voice trailed off, and Frostmask thought she was done. But, then Pineshade's

gaze directly sought out Frostmask's in the crowd, and Frostmask was surprised to see a bit of reluctance enter her expression.

"There is one other thing," Pineshade muttered in a low voice. "We all know how much Rabbitstar likes to talk. So well... when I was fighting with him, he did give some sort of er— explanation for his actions. He said that ShadowClan has been 'polluted.'"

Frostmask's hackles lifted, and she shifted from paw to paw even more uncomfortably as many of her clan-mates turned to stare pointedly at her. There was Dampfang, Marshnose, Dustleap, and Treefur, but even Darkpelt and Greytail were eying her too. Frostmask swallowed hard. With so many of her other clan-mates out of camp, and Autumnleap maybe not wanting anything to do with her anymore... her allies were feeling even more slim than usual.

"He said that ShadowClan had to be taught a lesson before it lets in 'even more dirty rogues than it already has,'" Pineshade concluded, her tail flicking uneasily.

Frostmask's ears jutted up, an icy trickle of horror running down her spine as the phrasing jumped out at her immediately.

'Even more rogues?!' But that sounds like... like WindClan somehow knows about Mistkit and Newtkit!

Frostmask's rapid heartbeat thumped in her ears, rage, terror, and worry filling her like a flood. She didn't know if she wanted to rush to the nursery and crouch over her kits, comforting and protecting them, or tear the pelt off the cat who put her kits in danger by telling WindClan about them.

Frostmask clenched her jaw so tightly, her fangs ached.

Speaking of...

Frostmask's gaze shot towards Dampfang, her blue eyes burning with righteous fury, but she found that Dampfang was already staring at her, the look in his green eyes nearly as angry.

"Enough is enough!" Dampfang snarled, shouldering his way

forward until he'd planted himself solidly in the middle of the crowd of cats so that he could sweep his gaze over them all. "How much more danger and injury does our Clan need to face until we finally acknowledge the inevitable?! Frostmask needs to resign as deputy. We are past the point of ShadowClan looking weak by folding to the pressure from the other Clans. Rabbitstar *was not* bluffing! Frostmask stepping down and ShadowClan looking weak *temporarily,* is far more preferable than the deaths of our clan-mates, which is permanent!"

Frostmask's entire pelt fluffed out, and she wanted to shriek back at him.

WindClan only attacked because you told them about how we found Newtkit and Mistkit, you traitor!

But, with great struggle, Frostmask remained silent. She knew she couldn't accuse Dampfang of something so dire without any real proof. No one would believe her... so she would have to gather evidence on her own first, somehow. Besides, it would be foolish for her to speak out right now anyway; it may make Dampfang look more sympathetic to her clan-mates and put her in a worse position. A few of her clan-mates were even already muttering their support for Dampfang now.

"She should've done it moons ago," Marshnose snarled in a quiet voice.

Treefur nodded, growling in agreement.

Even Darkpelt turned to gaze at Sedgestar, his face conflicted.

"Dampfang does have a point," he rumbled in a low voice before shooting a glance over at Frostmask from the corner of his eyes. "Although, no offense Frostmask, you haven't really been doing a *bad* job..."

Sedgestar lifted his tail for silence, his jaw set and his eyes bright with anger as he turned his gaze onto Dampfang.

"And, if Frostmask does step down, how long will this image of

'temporary' weakness last for us?" he demanded. "Do you seriously not understand that Rabbitstar will keep harassing at our borders whether Frostmask remains ShadowClan's deputy or not, as he has done on and off, for the *entirety* of the time that he's been WindClan's leader? Him catching the scent of weakness in the air will only make him more vicious, not less."

Dampfang lifted his chin defiantly. "I just—"

"Silence!" Sedgestar hissed, his eyes narrowing to furious slits. "I am tired of explaining myself over and over! I have made my choice. Frostmask will remain deputy until she dies, takes my place as your leader, or decides to step down by herself! And, you will *never* speak of this to me again, do you understand?"

Dampfang's ears folded down against his head. But, he held his tongue, although his gaze continued to smolder like green embers. Sedgestar turned away from him, his tail-tip flicking in agitation.

"Frostmask, come with me," Sedgestar rumbled. "I wish to converse with you alone."

Without another word to anyone else, Sedgestar stalked away to his den, slipping down into the root tunnel. Shooting a final, poisonous glare at Dampfang, Frostmask followed him.

When Frostmask reached the dim cavern, she found Sedgestar standing stiffly in the middle of the small earthen cave, facing away from her and towards the far wall, his tail-tip still flicking in tense, nervous twitches. But, when Frostmask stepped into his den proper, Sedgestar angled his head enough that he could glance back at her from over his shoulder.

"...Did the wording of Rabbitstar's message about the 'rogues' in our Clan also sound odd to you?" Sedgestar asked in a dangerously soft voice.

Frostmask's eyes widened in surprise for a heartbeat, but an instant later a rush of relieving vindication filled her from tail-tip to nose. Sedgestar also suspected the same thing she did?

"Yes!" Frostmask exclaimed, a growl rising in her throat. "It sounded like he knew! That he knew about Mistkit and Newtkit!"

Sedgestar nodded, turning to face her directly.

"The timing of the attack is suspicious too," he growled. "If this was just about you being deputy, why did Rabbitstar not attack a moon ago, after he first found out?"

Frostmask flexed her claws, kneading them into the loamy ground.

"Because this isn't just about me! It's about my kits too!" she snarled.

Frostmask found her conviction strengthening as she spoke her thoughts out loud and found that Sedgestar shared them.

They had been betrayed— *Dampfang* had betrayed them.

"Then the only question is how does Rabbitstar know," Sedgestar muttered. "I trust you completely, of course. Not only are you my deputy, but you're also raising the kits, and you wouldn't put them or yourself in danger. But who—"

"It's Dampfang!" Frostmask snarled, sinking her claws even more deeply into the ground as she wished she could do to his traitorous pelt. "It's obvious! It can't be anyone else; no one hates me more than him! And, you saw the way he leapt on the chance to try get rid of me as soon as news of the attack broke! He planned it all!"

Sedgestar's amber eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and he took a seat, wrapping his tail around his paws.

"Yes. It does seem so, doesn't it?" he murmured.

Frostmask's brow furrowed in confusion. If Sedgestar really believed that, then why did he seem so calm about it?

"...Like you said, it's obvious. But it is also strange that it's *so* obvious, isn't it?" Sedgestar continued in a low voice. "Dampfang is many things, but, if he did this, I would have never believed that he'd be foolish enough to so blatantly incriminate himself."

Frostmask blinked, a bit off-balance from Sedgestar's line of thinking. She slowly also took a seat, some of her fury ebbing as bewilderment rose up to replace it.

"But, we don't have any real proof that Dampfang did anything wrong. So, wouldn't that be reason enough for him to do it?" Frostmask argued. "He probably thinks there is no way for him to face punishment since we can't actually pin anything on him."

Sedgestar inclined his head to her. "Good point. But... it still doesn't feel right to me."

Frostmask exhaled sharply, pulling her mind away from sticking doggedly to Dampfang to try to search for other culprits. Who else in ShadowClan was so opposed to her being there that they would have told WindClan about her kits?

It wouldn't be Darkpelt or Dustleap. They may not totally agree with me being deputy, but they are too loyal to Sedgestar to have disobeyed his orders. Marshnose is a possibility, I suppose. But, Dampfang definitely hates me more than he does, so why would Marshnose do it instead of him? Greytail and Treefur also didn't look very pleased with me earlier, but would one of the elders really betray Sedgestar?

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake. It had to be Dampfang, right? It wouldn't make sense for it to be anyone else. Paledusk had even suspected him...

For a heartbeat, Frostmask froze like every hair on her pelt turned to ice, and the world seemed to tilt slightly around her.

Paledusk. Paledusk is the only cat outside of ShadowClan who knows the truth about the kits because I told him. Paledusk, who I told only a few days before WindClan's attack— an attack that he warned me about because he feared it would happen... Feared it would happen, or ***knew*** *it would happen?*

A rushing sound filled Frostmask's ears as if a gale had stirred up inside her skull. She gave her head another shake, trying to clear her mind. Frostmask inhaled a deep, slightly shaken breath, trying to think reasonably.

But why would he have done that? What does he have to gain from setting WindClan on ShadowClan? And, I have no proof of his involvement in this besides some slightly suspicious timing. And, he's never lied to me before...

"What are you thinking about?" Sedgestar's voice broke in, shattering Frostmask's concentration.

Frostmask blinked hard, pulling herself back to the present while her heart raced and her thoughts scrambled as she tried to conjure up any sentence that did not contain the name 'Paledusk.'

"I... I think I agree with you," Frostmask stammered finally, her gaze flashing back to Sedgestar. "It is suspicious."

Sedgestar nodded slowly.

"Well I'm glad we're in agreement," he murmured.

"W-what are you going to do now?" Frostmask asked, her tongue still tripping over itself as her unsettled feeling didn't leave her— only sinking down beneath the surface. "About this and about WindClan?"

Sedgestar's eyes narrowed slightly again. "We must keep an eye out for now. If someone did tell WindClan about the kits, then we need to know who."

Frostmask nodded, her mind shifting back seasons ago to when another ShadowClan secret had been revealed— when SkyClan discovered their tunnel, and Sedgestar had accused Frostmask of being the traitor.

But, Frostmask of course hadn't done anything, and that had turned out just to be a big misunderstanding. Could this be something similar? Could Rabbitstar have only been talking about her and knew nothing about the truth of the kits? Or was something far more nefarious afoot?

Unbidden, the omen of the rotten pine rose again in Frostmask's mind.

Is StarClan's prophecy finally coming true?

"And about WindClan?" she prompted again.

Sedgestar's tail uncurled from his paws to sweep over the ground, and a low growl vibrated in his throat.

"Rabbitstar respects only strength," he rumbled. "So, he will face our fangs and claws. We will plan a simple battle, and hit him back on the border as promptly as possible, doing twice the damage."

Sedgestar then sighed, looking tired for a moment. "I will think on this more. But, you don't have to remain here as I do. You are dismissed, Frostmask."

Frostmask was relieved to leave. Although she usually liked to know what Sedgestar was thinking, right now she was far too distracted by everything going on to be particularly useful during the planning process. With a dip of her head to her leader, Frostmask slipped from the den.

More of her clan-mates were back from their patrols and filling the camp as they enjoyed the warm green-leaf sun, although a low level of tension did crackle through the air after WindClan's attack on the border patrol. Frostmask, however, didn't join her Clan. She needed to be alone with only her thoughts, so she could try to figure out what all this meant.

Frostmask's gaze flickered over the pelts around her as she walked, searching for Dampfang so she could avoid him. But there was no need. She couldn't find him; he must be out sulking in the forest or inside the warriors' den.

And I thought telling Autumnleap would be the only really difficult thing about today. But, now I have to deal with all this too!

Frostmask slipped into the nursery again, happy to find the den empty besides Newtkit and Mistkit, who were napping peacefully in the nest. Frostmask curled tightly around them, putting her nose to her tail to make a full barrier as if she could shield them from all the horrible things happening in the outside world.

The warmth of the tiny kits' bodies pressing against her brought Frostmask some comfort, but she still sighed deeply, her flanks trembling with the effort.

How has everything gone so wrong? ShadowClan and the other Clans. Dampfang. Autumnleap... And now even Paledusk? Could he really have turned against me too?

Frostmask frowned into the fur of her tail.

But, that doesn't make any sense! Paledusk has been so helpful. He's always been right about things— this warning shouldn't be any different.

So, then why could she not escape this horrible, sinking intuition deep in the pit of her stomach?

Frostmask blinked out of her thoughts, tensing as the entrance to the nursery suddenly rustled. Then the tension in her muscles evolved from just tight to completely knotted when she saw the board auburn head that poked inside.

"Can I come in?" Autumnleap asked in a soft voice.

Frostmask gave a hesitant nod, lifting her chin from the mossy nest as Autumnleap quietly stepped inside. Frostmask's gaze combed over every part of him, searching for any signs of rage in bristling fur or a lashing tail. But, Autumnleap's body language was calm as he padded up to her, his amber eyes clear.

"I'm glad you're okay," Frostmask muttered. "After you left, I was worried. WindClan—"

"I heard," Autumnleap said in a low voice. "I hope Snakeeyes will be okay. But for me... yeah. I'm fine. I ended up kinda close to the border, but I didn't see any trace of a WindClan cat while I was out thinking."

Frostmask nodded mutely. She inhaled a deep, trembling breath, anticipation swelling in her as she waited to hear what Autumnleap would have to say after his time 'thinking.'

Autumnleap sighed briefly, settling down in a crouch about a half a

tail-length away from her and tucking his paws under his white-furred chest.

"I'm sorry I got mad at you," he murmured. "It all came as quite a shock, but I—"

"Don't apologize," Frostmask cut him off, her ears twisting back. "You have every right to be mad. I lied to you."

A deep, concerned crease appeared in Autumnleap's brow.

"But, I don't want you to think that me being mad means that I 'hate' you," he said in a low voice, his gaze scouring hers. "I love you, Frostmask. That's why I felt so hurt that you didn't feel comfortable enough to tell me about this."

"I was just scared," Frostmask said in a very small voice.

She lowered her eyes from his, unable to hold his gaze. "I love you too, and I couldn't stand the thought of losing you. But, I also couldn't stand the thought of this— *us,* our family— being fake because I lied to you about what I really am. That's why I decided I had to tell you."

Autumnleap leaned forward, closing the gap between them so he could give one of her ears a gentle, comforting lick.

"It's not fake, Frostmask," he promised. "I still love you and our family. We'll work through this together."

Powerful relief washed over Frostmask like a wave. She buried her face in the thick ruff of fur around Autumnleap's neck, a happy, but strangled purr rising around the lump in her throat. Autumnleap gave a soothing purr back in response, resting his chin on the top of her head. Frostmask screwed her eyes shut, breathing in Autumnleap's warm, familiar scent.

At least... this is one thing that Paledusk wasn't right about.

After a few moments, Autumnleap gently pulled back so he could look down at her, and Frostmask blinked up at him in response.

"But, you have to promise, Frostmask— no more secrets, alright?" he asked, his gaze searching hers.

Frostmask gave a small nod. "No more secrets."

Autumnleap purred in relief. Frostmask echoed with a purr of her own for a moment before she took a deep breath, readying herself as the memories of her many meetings with Paledusk rose in her mind.

"Okay," she murmured, shifting to a more comfortable position, but keeping her tail still wrapped around their sleeping kits. "Well in that case, I have a lot to explain. Something happened today, with WindClan... and the kits. But, I think it will make more sense if just start from the beginning."

Autumnleap nodded, scooting over to press his side to hers, and Frostmask began to tell him everything.

Patterns

"Well, why wouldn't Paledusk have done it?" Autumnleap asked in a low voice.

He and Frostmask were sprawled out in the nursery, Newtkit and Mistkit nestled between their two bodies while the other queens and kits played out in the camp. Even though it had been a couple of days since Frostmask first told Autumnleap about Paledusk, they still found themselves returning to the conversation at every chance they got— when they were alone and could talk in hushed voices to not risk anyone overhearing.

Autumnleap seemed convinced that Paledusk had been the one to tell WindClan about Newtkit and Mistkit. Frostmask found his suspicion understandable— after all, he had none of the positive interactions with Paledusk that Frostmask had. All Autumnleap knew of him was that he was SkyClan's deputy, and that he'd badly wounded him when they were apprentices and killed Swoopstrike.

Frostmask had also once been equally, if not more, suspicious and furious towards Paledusk when she'd first found out her relation to him seasons ago. But, in the moons since then, he'd proved himself to be a valuable ally. It wouldn't be fair for her to discount all the ways he'd helped her just because of this one new suspicion of him, right?

"Because he hasn't lied to me before," Frostmask responded in a murmur. "He helped me figure out how to determine what prey was poisoned or not, remember? And, he's been right about his warnings about ThunderClan and WindClan. It just doesn't make sense for him to help me so many times, but then turn around and try to hurt me so badly by telling WindClan about the kits, right? But we do know a cat who would love to hurt me more than probably anything else in this world..."

Autumnleap nodded.

"Dampfang," he said with a grim growl.

"Exactly," Frostmask sighed. "I—"

But she cut herself off as Mistkit stirred against her tail, waking up with an inquisitive squeak. Wobbling slightly, he lifted his head up and his little eyes cracked open for the first time.

Frostmask's breath caught in her throat as he gazed around blearily before his eyes finally drifted up to her face. Their eyes met, his the same murky grey-blue color that every kitten was born with. With another squeak, he took a couple of unbalanced steps forward as if trying to get closer to her before bumping into his sister's side, although Newtkit was still sleeping too soundly to stir. Seemingly satisfied with the progress he made, Mistkit settled down next to Newtkit, his eyes drifting shut again.

A loud purr started rumbling in Frostmask's throat without prompting, and no more than an instant later, Autumnleap was echoing her with a purr of his own.

"He's caught up to his sister now," Autumnleap murmured, bending his head to give Mistkit's back a lick.

Frostmask nodded. Newtkit's eyes had opened just yesterday. Frostmask had been a bit worried about Mistkit when he didn't follow her the same day— he had been weaker than Newtkit when they'd first found them, after all. But, now her anxieties were settled. He seemed to be hitting the same milestones as her; he just had to do it in his own time.

Soon the kits would start to pick up on their parents' words, and she and Autumnleap would have to be much more careful about what they talked about in front of them. On one paw, Frostmask was excited for them to grow so she could teach them all about ShadowClan and see what personalities they would develop, but on the other paw, as they got older, keeping an eye on them would require a lot more work when they no longer just slept and ate all day. And, Frostmask was already so busy!

Frostmask glanced up at Autumnleap, her gaze softening. At least

she wasn't doing this alone.

Even though she hadn't come to any sort of real conclusion about the situation with WindClan, the kits, Dampfang and Paledusk, she already felt so much lighter after sharing the burden of her secrets with Autumnleap. She was no longer trapped in her own mind with her thoughts and fears.

As if sensing her gaze on him, Autumnleap lifted his eyes too. His expression became more solemn as they made eye-contact as if remembering the danger their kits could be in, if someone had told WindClan about their outsider blood.

"Anyway though, I think we should keep an eye on Dampfang for sure," he said, bringing them back to the conversation as his purr died down. "He does have a motive for telling WindClan. But, that doesn't mean that we should totally disregard Paledusk either. There are just too many little things that seem off about the timing of the attack and his warning about it... Are you *sure* that he's never lied to you before?"

Frostmask's purr also fell silent as she wracked her memories, trying to recall her every meeting with Paledusk over the past moons. But, it was difficult. How was she supposed to remember every little detail that they had talked about? Her general sense was that Paledusk had been truthful and helpful towards her, but maybe there had been small lies in parts, who could say? But, could she really hold that against Paledusk when she'd been omitting information from him too? She'd of course not told him certain things— especially about ShadowClan's weakness during the long, hard leaf-bare.

Frostmask opened her mouth, about to respond to Autumnleap, but before she could get any words out, her mind finally finished shifting through her memories of meetings with Paledusk, reaching the earliest one— when she had first found out about him after SkyClan's attack on their camp, and she him gone into SkyClan territory to confront him.

Frostmask slowly closed her mouth again, her brow furrowing.

Her thoughts about that night were shadowed by the haze of anger and betrayal that had thrummed through her after Sedgestar's accusation against her. It made some of her memories clouded, but it conversely sharpened others— searing them into her mind forever. And, out of those clear memories, there were two things obviously incompatible with each other: Sedgestar derisively spitting that her worthless SkyClan father hadn't wanted her or her mother. And, Paledusk swearing that he'd never known that May had his kits, but that he had wanted her to join SkyClan to be with him— May had been the one who refused and rejected SkyClan.

Frostmask's stomach clenched painfully like she'd swallowed a huge lump of ice.

"I... I guess there is this one thing," Frostmask muttered in a low voice. "The day Sedgestar told me that my father was a SkyClan cat, he also said that he didn't want me or my mother in SkyClan. But, when I later confronted Paledusk about that *he* told me that the truth was that he did want May to join him in SkyClan. But, it was May who didn't want to be in any clan at the time, so they broke up, and Paledusk never knew that she had his kits... At the time, I assumed that Sedgestar had been lying to make himself sound better for rescuing me."

Frostmask's ears flattened down, and she ducked her head, staring down at her paws.

"But... do you think... maybe it was Paledusk that lied?" she whispered. "Did he really not want me or May to join him in SkyClan? Even though we were *dying?"*

Autumnleap swept his tail over to comfortingly drape it on her side. His touch was soft, but his voice firm when he spoke.

"You have to find out from Sedgestar what May said to him exactly. We need to figure out which story is true."

Frostmask's gaze flashed back to his, her eyes widening. "But, wouldn't it be suspicious for me to suddenly ask Sedgestar about my father?! He'll think that I'm disloyal! That I want to join SkyClan!"

"He's not going to think you're disloyal just because you ask him one question," Autumnleap said, although he blinked at her sympathetically. "I know that you're worried, and Sedgestar did really betray you once. But, I think he feels bad about that, and that he's changed. He wouldn't have made you his deputy if he didn't trust you. He picked you to replace Grovepelt, who was probably the cat he trusted most in the world!"

Frostmask shook her head.

"There's no way he trusts me as much as Grovepelt," she scoffed.

Autumnleap flicked his ears, knocking away her protest.

"But, my point that he trusts you still stands," he said. "There must be a way for you to ask him about it without coming across as suspicious. But we have to find out if Sedgestar's story is true or not! Then we'll know if Paledusk is untrustworthy."

Frostmask flicked her tail as she thought.

"I guess that I could say to Sedgestar that taking in Newtkit and Mistkit has gotten me thinking more about my own parents..." she muttered.

Autumnleap nodded, his eyes brightening. "Yeah, that's great!"

He leaned in to give her cheek an encouraging nudge with his muzzle.

"See, that's why you're the deputy, not me," he teased. "I don't have the cunning for it."

Frostmask huffed in quiet laughter, but her stomach still clenched at the thought of talking about this with Sedgestar.

"Okay," she murmured. "I'll talk to him about it soon. But, I better get going now. Sunhigh will be ending soon, and I have patrols to send out. I think I might go out on one of them. I've been cooped up in camp all day."

Autumnleap nodded in understanding, and Frostmask rose to her

paws, sparing a final affectionate glance towards him and her kits. Then, after arching her back in a stretch, she slipped from the den.

Frostmask blinked as she emerged into the bright camp. It was a mostly peaceful scene. Poolcloud and Dewleaf cuddled together as they watched their four kits running amok in the cleaning, racing each other from the Oak Tree to Clanrock. Treefur and Greytail were gossiping in front of the elders' den. And, Rowanheart was grooming Snakeeyes' pelt in front of the entrance to the medicine cat's den.

Gratitude stirred in Frostmask's chest as her eyes skimmed over the white-furred warrior. Fresh wounds still marked her pelt, but her blue and green eyes were bright as she lounged in front of the medicine cat's den, soaking up the warm sunshine.

They were lucky that Snakeeyes was recovering so well from WindClan's ambush, and they were especially lucky that the retaliation Sedgestar led yesterday went so smoothly as well. Injuries overall had been minor.

Frostmask had been unable to participate in the fight, since she was still supposed to be a 'nursing queen.' Although most cats probably expected her to maintain some duties as deputy, going on a battle patrol would definitely raise questions. Of course, that was assuming that WindClan didn't already know that Frostmask's kits weren't hers by blood...

Frostmask shook her ears. Frustratingly, Sedgestar said that he hadn't gotten any new information from any of the WindClan cats during the fight, so they remained in the dark, left with only speculating about who could be at fault.

Frostmask's tail lashed at the thought, her eyes searching for Dampfang in camp, but she couldn't spot him. Ever since Pineshade ended things with him, he seemed to keep more to himself than ever before, although he still of course made time to be a thorn in Frostmask's side.

She scowled to herself.

Although these days he's less of a single thorn and more of an entire bramble bush!

Shaking off the angry thoughts, Frostmask took a deep breath to compose herself before letting out a quiet yowl, summoning the warriors to her for patrol assignments. She sat down, curling her fluffy tail around her paws as her clan-mates rose to their paws from all different parts of the camp and came to gather around her.

Frostmask swept her gaze over her clan-mates as they approached. After so many days of practice, handing out patrols and speaking in front of all her clan-mates was growing easier and easier, although her ease was now tainted with suspicion after the WindClan ambush. Could one of her clan-mates really have betrayed them? Or had it been Paledusk like Autumnleap suspected?

Frostmask again pulled herself from her thoughts as her clan-mates settled down.

"Even though our fight against WindClan yesterday went well and sent Rabbitstar a fierce and swift message that ShadowClan is not to be trifled with," Frostmask began without preamble, "we still need to remain alert for any attacks from both his border and ThunderClan's. Redclaw, I'd like you to lead the WindClan border patrol this evening."

The senior warrior dipped her mottled colored head to Frostmask in agreement.

"I will take the ThunderClan border," Frostmask continued. "I would be happy for the excuse to stretch my legs. Dustleap and Beeclaw, you two lead the evening's hunting patrols. And, Marshnose—"

Frostmask glanced over at the tabby and white warrior, who met her gaze cooly. "I'd like for you to take any cats not on patrol, and who aren't too tired from the morning patrols, out for some battle training practice. You'll be in charge of organizing whatever training you wish."

Marshnose gave a curt nod. "Fine then."

"That's everything," Frostmask said, standing as she dismissed the crowd. "Poolcloud, Mosspounce, and Murmurstep, do you guys want to come on my patrol?"

"Sounds fun!" Mosspounce chirped while Poolcloud and Murmurstep nodded in agreement.

As her clan-mates padded off to follow her instructions, one cat who had been in the back of the crowd lingered behind. Frostmask stiffened as she finally caught a good glimpse of him as he stalked out of the shadows of Clanrock and up to her, his dark shoulder fur already bristling.

"I'll meet you guys by the thorn tunnel in a moment," Frostmask muttered to Poolcloud, Murmurstep, and Mosspounce. "I've got to take care of this first."

Her friends padded off as Frostmask turned to Dampfang. When she met his gaze, he bared his teeth at her.

"What is this, Frostmask? You haven't assigned me to lead any patrols in days," he growled accusatively.

Frostmask's lip twitched as she fought back a snarl.

"I haven't? Sorry, I hadn't noticed," she responded coldly.

It was a blatant lie, of course, but with her growing suspicions of Dampfang, she was too wary of him to put him in charge of any patrols. He could still patrol if someone invited him on one, but hopefully he couldn't cause too much trouble that way. She'd also been subtly splitting up his friends, keeping Dampfang from easily gathering them all together to scheme. Today Marshnose had been ordered to go to battle training, while Dustleap had been ordered to hunt.

Dampfang narrowed his harsh green eyes at Frostmask, clearly not buying it.

"Sedgestar didn't take me on the battle patrol either," he hissed. "And, I'm the best fighter ShadowClan's got."

"You should take at up with Sedgestar then," Frostmask said in clipped tones. "He chose the cats in that patrol, not me."

Dampfang released a wordless hiss.

"I won't stand for this unfair treatment," he snarled. "A deputy can't be biased against her clan-mates!"

Frostmask glanced around at their other clan-mates nonchalantly, watching as they all walked about, following her orders without complaint.

"Really? Because no one else seems to have a problem with me," she said.

Dampfang's gaze blazed in anger, and he took a step closer to her, lowering his voice to a menacing rumble so no one could overhear.

"Don't be so sure. You forget that the only reason that any of ShadowClan listens to you is because of *Sedgestar,"* Dampfang growled. "No sane cat here would ever really believe in you. If Sedgestar wasn't here propping you up, it would be clear what you really are— *nothing.* Just a wannabe clan-cat. A sad little rogue who ended up in a position of power by happenstance. Because of a foolish decision by a leader who is growing increasingly erratic—"

"Watch your tongue, Dampfang!" Frostmask cut him off with a snarl, her hackles bristling as her anger rose. "Sedgestar has already commanded you to not argue about me being deputy anymore, but what you're saying now is hardly better! In fact, it *almost* sounds like treason. If you ever say anything like this again, I may have to start taking your idle threats against me and Sedgestar seriously!"

Dampfang's eyes widened in outrage.

"Has Sedgestar become such a tyrant that it is treasonous now to speak your mind?!" he snapped, his tail trashing. "The ShadowClan I was born in valued independent thought. What happened to that Clan?!"

Frostmask flattened her ears against her head.

"Independence is one thing," she growled. "Defiance is another. If every cat here was as defiant as you, there would be no Clan left."

Dampfang's eyes narrowed to slits.

"But, I'm not the only cat here who thinks this way," he said in a low rumble.

"But, you are the only cat here who loathes me so much that you're willing to challenge me and our leader at every turn!" Frostmask snapped. "So I can at least be reassured in that."

Without another word, she turned on her heel and stalked away, going to gather up the cats for her patrol. But, her stomach still churned like she was going to be sick even as she walked away from Dampfang.

No matter her dislike of the tom, she had never thought of him capable of putting kits' lives in danger before the incident with WindClan. But now, she had no idea what Dampfang's limits actually were, and it set her teeth on edge.

I should tell Sedgestar about what Dampfang said.

Promising herself to bring it up with him along with her question about May and Paledusk once she got back from her patrol, Frostmask gathered Poolcloud, Mosspounce, and Murmurstep, and they headed out of camp and towards the ThunderClan border.

The walk through the forest was peaceful, filled with only her and her friends' voices and laughter. Poolcloud gushed over Lichenkit's talent for remembering the names of plants as she spent more and more time trailing her uncle Elmclaw around, begging him to teach her about his herbs. Mosspounce eagerly expressed her desire to mentor one of Poolcloud's kits, while Murmurstep leaned over to whisper in Frostmask's ear that Sedgestar, under no circumstances, should make Mosspounce a mentor because she'd probably lose her poor scrap of an apprentice in the forest on their very first day. Frostmask purred in amusement, and she almost convinced herself that despite the stress and weirdness of the past few sunrises, today may actually be a perfectly normal day.

But that illusion shattered as they approached the thunderpath. Before it was even in sight, Frostmask could tell something was wrong. The powerful reek of ThunderClan hung in the air, much too strong to just be their markers from across the thunderpath.

The patrol's friendly chattering, mostly courtesy of Mosspounce, died out as they also noticed the scent. Poolcloud rumbled a low, uneasy growl, the long black-and-white fur down his spine bristling.

"Everyone stay alert," Frostmask hissed, falling down into a hunting crouch as her eyes skimmed the shadows between the pine trunks ahead.

Her companions immediately followed her lead and utter silence fell over the patrol as they stalked forward, tracking the ThunderClan scent.

Soon Frostmask's ears pricked as she picked up the sounds of paw-steps crunching through ferns and low voices that certainly did not belong to her clan-mates muttering to each other. Frostmask bit back a growl, her tail fur fluffing out in outrage.

It's like they're not even trying to be sneaky while they're trespassing!

Frostmask prowled around the trunk of a large pine but came to a halt as she spotted the pelts of the trespassing ThunderClan warriors in the distance. Her gaze flickered over the cats. She recognized them as Fernclaw, Foxbite, Brackenstep, and Duskfall, although Frostmask stiffened as she got a clear glimpse of the final cat's brown coat and realized that the ThunderClan deputy, Acornear, was here too.

A vole swung from Foxbite's mouth and Fernclaw clutched a mouse. Out of the corner of Frostmask's eye, she saw Murmurstep stiffen in anger when she noticed the stolen prey, while Mosspounce's eyes narrowed. Even Frostmask struggled to swallow back a growl.

How dare ThunderClan intrude and steal like this from us! Whatever faint scents they may have picked up from me on their territory a moon or more ago, this retaliation is hardly proportional!

Poolcloud touched his tail-tip to Frostmask's shoulder. His amber eyes smoldered, but he didn't move forward yet, a silent question in his gaze. Frostmask nodded. They couldn't allow such blatant disrespect for their borders to stand. Signaling her friends forward, Frostmask strode out of the shadows to challenge the intruders.

"What is the meaning of this, Acornear?!" Frostmask hissed.

She at least got some satisfaction out of the fact that the ThunderClan cats all jerked in surprise at the sound of her voice, whirling to face them, their backs arching defensively. But, the ThunderClaners seemed to regain some confidence when they realized that they outnumbered Frostmask's patrol, their chins lifting again. Acornear stepped forward, his lips curling back in a hostile snarl as he met Frostmask's gaze.

"ThunderClan doesn't fight nursing queens," Acornear growled. "Take your patrol back to camp and things don't have to get ugly, Frostmask."

Frostmask growled, flexing her claws into the ground, but she supposed she should be grateful that ThunderClan at least had seemingly no idea that she hadn't given birth to her kits herself. Frostmask was also glad that she's been spending enough time in the nursery lately that the scents of kits and milk from the den had strongly rubbed off on her. No cat right now would be able to tell, at least from a distance, that she wasn't producing milk.

"Do you seriously expect that we'd walk away like timid mice when we catch trespassing warriors on our land?!" Mosspounce cut in, her tail whipping furiously.

"We never know what to expect from ShadowClan!" Foxbite spat, dropping her stolen vole and taking an aggressive step forward, her ginger fur bristling out around her and her unusually long fangs bared. "Everyone knows you can never trust a *rat."*

Loud growls rumbled from Murmurstep and Poolcloud.

"You wanna say that again to my face?! I can't hear you over your ugly overbite!" Mosspounce snarled, her eyes blazing, but Frostmask

swished her tail out in front of her to stop her from charging forward.

"Wait a moment," she murmured to Mosspounce before turning her attention back to Acornear.

"Our clan-mates Swoopstrike and Dappledpelt lost their lives fighting on the behalf of your Clan," she hissed to him. "You should be ashamed of yourselves. I do not know what slight you think ShadowClan has done to you. But regardless, it cannot be so terrible that it warrants this aggression after we've been your allies for so long!"

Foxbite released a wordless hiss at Frostmask in response, and Fernclaw growled as well. But, Acornear at least had the decency to look conflicted. After a moment though, he gave his pelt a sharp shake as if dislodging his doubts.

"We are only repaying you back in kind," Acornear growled. "ThunderClan is not your plaything, and we will not lie here limply as you walk all over us!"

Frostmask rumbled a low growl of frustration, her ears flattening down.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "ShadowClan has always shown ThunderClan respect."

"Forked-tongue *liar,"* Fernclaw hissed, her bright green eyes narrowing. "ShadowClan may have turned into a den of rats, but you and Sedgestar are even worse than that. You're a pair of *snakes."*

"Shut up!" Poolcloud snarled in Frostmask's defense, his shoulders hunching as his muscles coiled beneath his dense black-and-white pelt.

Frostmask, though, was more confused than offended.

What do they think we've done?

Everything had been good with ThunderClan until after that final

battle with SkyClan, the one when Grovepelt was injured and Dappledpelt died. Did it have something to do with that battle? Could ThunderClan have some how pieced together that Sedgestar had asked Morningstar to lead the attack against RiverClan in order to position ThunderClan to receive the brute force of RiverClan's anger? But, Willowstar hadn't even really done anything to retaliate against ThunderClan yet, right?

Acornear's face hardened, and he dug his claws into the ground.

"Fernclaw is right," he growled. "Don't try to deny it, Frostmask. We've picked up ShadowClan scent on our territory as recently as a few days ago, even though Sedgestar swore at the gathering that no ShadowClan cat has been trespassing! Just because you helped us once does not mean that we belong to you, and you can traipse around our territory and steal our prey!"

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

What? They picked up ShadowClan scent on their territory again? But it couldn't have been me this time! I didn't even go through ThunderClan territory to meet with Paledusk!

"But we didn't do that!" Mosspounce snapped, echoing Frostmask's thoughts. "Do all ThunderClan cats have tadpoles inside their heads instead of brains?!"

The ThunderClan cats growled, their tails whipping aggressively, and Frostmask's stomach lurched. A fight was about to break out at any moment, but Frostmask didn't want to start a skirmish and make the tensions with ThunderClan worse when she didn't even understand what they were fighting over!

"Mosspounce, stand down," Frostmask said quickly to her friend before glancing back at Acornear again. "I do not what you are talking about, but I assure you Acornear that no cat has been stealing from ThunderClan by my or Sedgestar's command. I know you are an honorable cat, and I hope a part of you still believes that I am too. I will get to the bottom of this, I promise you."

Acornear's ears pricked in a look of surprise at Frostmask's genuine

appeal, and he hesitated. After a tense few heartbeats passed, Acornear finally gave a curt nod, waving his clan-mates back with a swish of his tail.

"See that you do," he hissed. "Come on, ThunderClan."

With a parting hiss from Foxbite, the ThunderClan patrol whirled around and fled ShadowClan's territory, streaking back over the thunderpath and disappearing into the dense undergrowth of their own land.

"You let them get away with *our* prey!" Mosspounce hissed, glaring at Frostmask accusatively once they were gone.

"Better to lose and mouse and a vole than to start a war," Frostmask retorted, her pelt prickling defensively. "Don't we already have enough to worry about with WindClan?"

"What were ThunderClan even meowing on about?" Murmurstep asked, her long-furred tail swishing in agitation. "We haven't been stealing prey! We haven't done anything at all to them."

"They could just be lying," Poolcloud pointed out.

Mosspounce nodded hard in agreement.

"That's exactly what they're doing! They're just looking for an excuse to start a fight!" she snarled, raking her claws through the peaty ground as she growled in frustration.

Frostmask's brow furrowed, and she felt much less certain than her clan-mate.

"But this is Morningstar and Acornear... Out of all the other leaders and deputies in the forest, I'd think that they'd been the least likely to lie about something like this," she said.

"But, what's the other option?" Murmurstep asked.

Frostmask remained quiet. She knew the other option— there really was some ShadowClan cat trespassing in ThunderClan territory, and it wasn't just her, leaving her scent there on accident.

Frostmask clenched her jaw.

Although she knew exactly which of her clan-mates would do something that reckless and against Sedgestar's orders— *Dampfang* — she didn't want to accuse him out loud, even to just her group of friends. She didn't want to shake their faith in their clan-mate if she was wrong.

But, what if she was *right?*

The situation with WindClan knowing about the kits was already suspicious enough, but now this too? Could Dampfang be involved in some kind of grander conspiracy to harm ShadowClan? But, what would he have to gain by provoking ThunderClan?

Despite her lack of evidence against Dampfang, fear still rippled through Frostmask's pelt.

"We need to go back and report this to Sedgestar right now," she muttered.

Spurned on by her worry, Frostmask led her patrol back to camp at a run.

Everything still seemed peaceful as the thorn barrier came into view. Frostmask slipped through the tunnel and entered into the camp, finding it largely as she'd left it. Whatever treacherous forces were lurking beneath the surface, they still had not yet struck. Since she and her patrol had returned early, the camp was pretty empty with most cats still out patrolling, but Frostmask prayed that Sedgestar was here as her gaze darted around the clearing.

She sighed in relief as she spotted him in front of the pine stump that formed the elder's den, chatting with Clearstream and Darkpelt.

"I'll take care of talking with Sedgestar," Frostmask said to Mosspounce, Murmurstep and Poolcloud.

Leaving her friends behind her, Frostmask strode straight up to Sedgestar, dipping her head to him respectfully as he cut off mid-sentence to Clearstream at her approach.

"I'm sorry to interrupt Sedgestar, but something happened on my patrol. May I speak to you about it privately?" she asked.

Frostmask's gaze briefly darted to Darkpelt. Although she wouldn't mind talking about what happened in front of Clearstream, she knew that Darkpelt would certainly not like hearing her imply that his son could be guilty of any sort of treason. It would be much better to talk to Sedgestar about this alone.

Sedgestar's eyes sparked with equal parts interest and concern at her request. "Of course. Let's go to my den."

Giving Darkpelt and Clearstream a nod of goodbye, Sedgestar rose to his paws and led Frostmask to his den in the roots of the Oak Tree. Once they were in the privacy of the earthen cave, her turned back to her.

"What happened? Was it WindClan again?" he asked, his tail already twitching.

Frostmask shook her head.

"No," she said. "I was patrolling the ThunderClan border. There we encountered a patrol led by Acornear on our side of the thunderpath."

Sedgestar held as still as a cat carved from stone as Frostmask described the full events of the confrontation, and everything Acornear had told her about the ShadowClan scents ThunderClan continued to find on their territory.

"Morningstar is escalating," Sedgestar muttered under his breath once Frostmask had finished.

His tail was swishing again, as he stared out at nothing on the dirt wall of the den. Sedgestar seemed to be more talking to himself than to Frostmask, but Frostmask nodded in agreement anyway.

"But, he's only doing it because he thinks we provoked him first," Frostmask said.

Sedgestar's eyes snapped to hers again.

"So you think Acornear and Morningstar are telling the truth," he said quietly. "And, a ShadowClan warrior has been trespassing."

"Do you not think so?" Frostmask challenged.

Sedgestar held her gaze for a long moment before he blinked and looked away, and that silence answered her question better than any words could.

"First WindClan somehow finds out about Newtkit and Mistkit, making them more hostile to us. And now ThunderClan is being provoked against ShadowClan too?" Frostmask continued, growing bolder at his agreement. "It's too coincidental."

"At the last gathering, Morningstar said that they'd picked up ShadowClan scents on their territory for the past moon," Sedgestar pointed out. "That's much longer than our problem with WindClan. They could be unrelated."

Frostmask's tail lashed once.

"No, it's a pattern. We're just only able to see it now," she argued.

Were those scents ThunderClan picked in the first place ever mine at all? Or was it all Dampfang?

Frostmask shook her head."It's all just too suspicious. A traitor—"

"You are jumping to conclusions," Sedgestar cut her off. "I appreciate you sharing your intuition, but you must be careful not to accuse your clan-mates of something so serious without proper evidence."

Frostmask set her jaw stubbornly, the building anger and fear in her keeping her from backing down from her leader.

He says I'm jumping to conclusions without proper evidence?! But, he didn't have any problem accusing me as a traitor seasons ago, when I never even did anything! And, now when the evidence is as plain as the nose on his face, he refuses to see it?!

"Not clan-mates. *Clan-mate.* And, you know who it is and much as I

do," Frostmask hissed, her eyes narrowing.

Sedgestar shook his head, taking a pace towards her.

"Do not let your dislike for that tom blind to any other option," he said. "Perhaps one of our clan-mates instead has made the ill-advised decision to become mates with a ThunderClan cat, meeting with them on ThunderClan land and explaining the scents. It's a foolish choice to be sure, but not nearly as dire as treason."

Frostmask rumbled a low, discontented growl.

"Do you know what Dampfang said to me today?" she snapped. "He called you a 'foolish leader' who is making increasingly 'erratic decisions.' Tell me that doesn't sound treasonous to you?"

Sedgestar's ears flattened, and he screwed his eyes shut for a moment like a monstrous headache was pounding beneath his ears.

"I understand why you're so upset. The WindClan situation could put your kits directly at risk, and if ThunderClan turns on us too, then ShadowClan is under even more threat. And you may be right about Dampfang, Frostmask," Sedgestar said, and Frostmask blinked in surprise at his concession. "But, we still do not have any proof. What would you have me do? Imprison him or exile him because of a hunch? Do you think my sister will rejoice me banishing her son based on your intuition alone? Would Dewleaf or Darkpelt thank us for it? Do you want me to make the divisions in our Clan even worse and tear it apart completely?"

Frostmask dropped her gaze and her shoulders hunched slightly as some of her fight left her.

"...No," she muttered.

Sedgestar's eyes opened again.

"Do not think I'm discounting your worries. But, if we act too rashly, we risk creating more problems than we solve," he said. "What we need to do now is focus on the issues we *can* solve, starting with what to do about ThunderClan."

Frostmask took a seat and nodded, reluctantly seeing Sedgestar's wisdom despite her lingering anger and suspicion towards Dampfang.

"You may have adverted a fight with ThunderClan today, but if Morningstar is already willing to escalate to trespassing and stealing, I doubt a battle can be entirely prevented," Sedgestar continued. "So the question is, do we strike first or do we remain defensive?"

Frostmask's ears flicked as she thought, and she drew her tail closer to her, wrapping it around her paws for comfort as anxiety about their threatening neighbors set back in.

"Either option worries me," she murmured. "Especially since I doubt WindClan is done harassing our other border... will ShadowClan be able to stand alone against two clans?"

Sedgestar's ears angled back uncertainly.

"Perhaps we should start more seriously considering a new alliance — one with SkyClan or RiverClan," he muttered.

Frostmask nodded slowly, and both of them fell silent as they thought.

I do still have that offer of alliance from Paledusk, and if it was Dampfang who told WindClan about the kits, then we would have no reason to be wary of him...

Frostmask's features slowly drew down into a frown as a disturbing realization began to take hold of her like creeping ice.

*But... Paledusk's offer of alliance... Isn't it coincidental that we're only properly considering it **now** because WindClan and ThunderClan are threatening our borders? WindClan is doing so because they somehow found out about the kits... Could Paledusk have **told** them just to put ShadowClan in a bad position, to force us to agree to ally with SkyClan?*

Frostmask blinked in shock, giving her ears a small shake.

But, what about ThunderClan? Could he really be involved there? They

are hostile because of ShadowClan scents on their territory. ...Could Paledusk be planting the scents somehow?

Her belly churned as she recalled the battle in ShadowClan camp, when they'd first thought it'd been RiverClan attacking them, not SkyClan.

*SkyClan has disguised their scents as another clan before. Would it really be so surprising if Paledusk knew how to make his scent smell like ShadowClan? And those scents did seem to appear in ThunderClan territory on those very same nights that I went to Fourtrees to meet with Paledusk... to make me think **I** did it?*

Frostmask's muscles clenched, her entire body from nose to tail-tip tense and cold. She inhaled a slow, slightly shaky breath, her heartbeat pounding in her ears like thunder.

Coincidence after coincidence after coincidence... She had no hard proof, but she'd have to be a fool to ignore the sickening pattern unfolding in front her like a poisonous flower.

But why would Paledusk so desperately want this alliance between ShadowClan and SkyClan? And why would he put me in such risk to get it? I thought he cared about me!

Frostmask clenched her jaw, her gut twisting as confusion, hurt, and conflict swirled inside her like an out-of-control hurricane.

Could I really have gotten it all wrong? Is Paledusk the true source of all these problems, and not Dampfang?!

Frostmask blinked hard a few times, pulling her gaze back to Sedgestar. She had to ask him about what she spoke with Autumnleap about at sun-high— about what her mother had said when she had brought her to ShadowClan. It was the only thing that would give her some clarity into Paledusk and help her figure out if he could really be capable of such an elaborate deception.

Frostmask took a brief, trembling breath, shoving her emotions back down under the surface and putting on a veneer of calm. Luckily, Sedgestar seemed to have been too wrapped up in his own

thoughts to have noticed her inner conflict, and Frostmask was becoming quite an expert at hiding her true feelings.

"Sedgestar?" Frostmask asked, and Sedgestar's eyes refocused on her. "On second thought, I don't think we should seek a new alliance yet. I don't think we should attack ThunderClan yet either. ThunderClan has been our closest alliances for seasons now, and Acornear was at least somewhat willing to hear me out today. There may still be hope to straighten things out with diplomacy. Striking first would remove that option entirely... I don't think it's wise."

Sedgestar blinked at her, mulling her words over.

"And if there is a traitor in ShadowClan, then couldn't they leak any sort of battle plan to the enemy?" Frostmask continued, her tail swishing anxiously. "We need to be more cautious and careful now with our planning than ever before."

After a moment more of hesitation, Sedgestar nodded.

"I agree," he rumbled, his amber gaze approving. "Well thought out, Frostmask."

Frostmask's chest warmed a fraction at his praise, but her worry about Paledusk eclipsed most of her self-satisfaction. She licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. She would have to broach the subject of him with Sedgestar now, but she wasn't sure how to do it subtly.

"I will try to speak about this with Morningstar at the next gathering," Sedgestar continued before she had the chance to figure it out. "And, I'll make an announcement to the clan. We will make it clear that no cat is to enter ThunderClan territory without permission, and we will increase patrols on the ThunderClan border. If one of our clan-mates is sneaking over there, more patrols may be enough to deter them as well as keeping ThunderClan out."

Frostmask nodded in agreement, although her brow furrowed in concern as well.

With the increased patrolling we're already doing on WindClan's border and the extra battle training, our clan-mates will soon be exhausted.

Frostmask flicked her ears trying to shake off the thought.

It's not for forever, she promised herself. *Just until I'm able to find out what's causing all this.*

"Can I also ask you about something unrelated?" Frostmask spoke up.

Sedgestar blinked at her curiously, and Frostmask did her best not to look uncomfortable. It wasn't her most subtle or elegant transition, but she was starting to feel like no longer had the time to be coy. She needed to know what was going on with Paledusk *now.*

Frostmask inhaled a deep breath to steel herself.

I need to do it, even if it makes Sedgestar believe I'm disloyal... Better that than ShadowClan being torn apart by ThunderClan and WindClan, right?

"What is it?" Sedgestar asked.

Frostmask dipped her head, breaking eye contact for a moment.

"Ever since I've started raising Newtkit and Mistkit, I've been thinking about my own parents more," she murmured, her stomach fluttering nervously. "I keep thinking about something you told me — something that May said when she first brought me to ShadowClan. You told me that May's mate, my... father, didn't want me or May to be with him. Is that really true?"

Frostmask waited in hushed anticipation, but Sedgestar didn't respond. He remained quiet for several long moments, and as the heartbeats dragged past, Frostmask's entire body tensed until she was holding her breath.

Is he not going to tell me?!

"I'm sorry," Sedgestar finally said, his voice gentle. "But, it's true. I know it must be hard for you to hear, especially now that you have kits of your own. I... When May told me, I could hardly believe it myself. All I could think of was Rowanheart, and how I would've moved the heavens and the earth to get to him if he was ever taken

from me. I couldn't imagine a father who wouldn't do the same."

Frostmask's paws started to tremble, but she made her eyes look back up to Sedgestar and forced her lungs to start moving again, inhaling a shaky breath. Sedgestar's side of the story remained the same, but it didn't give her any new information. It was still simply Sedgestar's word against Paledusk's.

"Can you tell me what May said exactly? Why he didn't want us?" she rasped.

Sedgestar gave his head a small shake.

"She didn't say why. Only that he would not allow you or your mother to join SkyClan. And..." Sedgestar blinked at her, his amber gaze turning pitying as his expression became even more troubled. "May was injured with a deep claw wound on her shoulder. She told me that her mate was the one who attacked her. But, that's all I know."

Frostmask's eyes widened, and she clenched her jaw to hold back a gasp, her heart thumping painfully against her ribs.

Is that true? Did Paledusk really attack May?!

Frostmask did her best to remain composed, at least on the outside, ruthlessly shoving her shock and dismay down for her to address later— at some point when she wasn't sitting in front of her leader.

Frostmask dipped her head to Sedgestar.

"Thank you for telling me," she said, relieved that her mew came out steady. "Even though it's not a pleasant story."

"Yes, well..." Sedgestar cleared his throat and shuffled his paws a bit like he wasn't sure what else to say.

"Do you have anything else we need to talk about? Otherwise, I'd like to go be with my kits," Frostmask added, still avoiding his eyes.

"No, you're dismissed," Sedgestar said, looking a bit relieved to escape the awkward turn of conversation. "I'll call the clan meeting

about ThunderClan later into the night, when the rest of the patrols have returned."

Frostmask nodded, rising to her paws and padding out of the den. Once she finally exited Sedgestar's presence, she allowed the new, troubling information to wash over her again. Instead of immediately heading to the nursery and presenting it to Autumnleap, Frostmask hurried to the secluded corner of camp behind the Oak Tree to think about it alone. She crouched there to hide under the overhanging thorn barrier, hoping that no one would bother her as her mind spun.

Frostmask wracked her earliest memories, trying to pull up any scrap of detail she might have missed before when she'd thought about that long, terrible walk from May's den to ShadowClan territory— some image that could verify or refute what Sedgestar had told her.

She'd been so little that the memories had become faded by time. But, as Frostmask placed herself back in the paw-steps of her younger self, she could still recall the scent of blood in the air. But, Frostmask also remembered the pain in her paws and her cracked and bleeding pads... That was where the blood scent was coming from right? May didn't have any blood on her shoulder, did she?

Frostmask silently cursed her foggy memories. Why couldn't she remember?!

Her thoughts whirled desperately, searching for a solution. She needed more information, otherwise how did she know that Sedgestar wasn't just misremembering, and Paledusk's versions of events were actually true? It had been many seasons ago at this point, after all.

There were other ShadowClan cats who had been on that patrol— Emberflower and Beeclaw. She could ask them, but surely their stories would be the same as Sedgestar's, right? Sedgestar wouldn't tell her something that he knew his mate or Beeclaw could easily refute.

Unless... Sedgestar had made up the story about Paledusk attacking

May, and ordered them to tell her the same to keep Frostmask from wanting to go join SkyClan.

Frostmask blinked miserably, her stomach twisting more and more until she felt like she was going to retch.

Could Sedgestar have really done that? She knew he could be secretive and manipulative... but a part of her also thought that they'd grown closer since she became deputy, and that he did trust her now, like Autumnleap said. Sedgestar wouldn't tell her such a terrible lie, right? But if he wasn't lying or misremembering, then that meant Paledusk had driven them away and attacked May, *his own mate!*

Frostmask ground her teeth together, her shoulders hunching as her emotions overwhelmed her.

She needed another opinion. She needed someone who knew something about Paledusk and May to act as a tiebreaker between Sedgestar's version of events and Paledusk's. It would be the only way for her to find out who Paledusk really was and what he was capable of.

But who else is there to ask? May is dead! Slatewhisker knew her, but he's dead too! No other cats in ShadowClan know anything, and Paledusk kept his relationship with May a secret from SkyClan. No one else knows about my parents. No one else would have any more information about what really happened between them!

Frostmask's eyes widened, her pelt bristling out as an idea suddenly struck her like a lightning bolt.

No one else knows about Paledusk and May... expect for maybe one cat.

Her heart hammering, Frostmask suddenly scrambled to her paws, sprinting to the nursery. She rushed inside, only slowing to tip-toe around Larkfoot, Amberberry, Dewleaf, and their kits as they napped, so she could make it to Autumnleap's side without waking them.

Autumnleap was sleeping too, his eyes shut and his fluffy bulk

curled delicately around Newtkit and Mistkit. Frostmask prodded his auburn side unceremoniously with her paw until Autumnleap lifted his head, his brow furrowed.

"Huh? What's going on?" he mumbled, turning his bleary gave onto her.

"Shh," Frostmask hushed him so he wouldn't wake the others.

Autumnleap blinked at her in confusion, and Frostmask crouched down by his side, putting her muzzle close to his ear.

"Autumnleap, I know what I have to do to find out about who Paledusk really is," she said in a whisper that trembled with anticipation. "There is only one cat who could know something... I need to talk to Birdstrike!"

A Favor

The full moon had crested the tops of the trees, but some blue color lingered in the sky as if the sun was reluctant to fully slip beneath the horizon. Frostmask felt similarly conflicted about the night and the gathering it heralded. It would surely be a fraught one, if the events of the past moon were anything to go by. But, it might also bring with it some solutions to questions that Frostmask desperately needed answered.

Frostmask blinked, pulling her gaze off of the full moon and refocusing back on Autumnleap as the two of them sat in a secluded spot a little ways outside of camp— still within earshot of a yowl, but not enough for any cat back there to overhear their conversation as they discussed the plan for the night.

Autumnleap had worked himself up again, as he seemingly did now each time Paledusk's name was merely mentioned. Although Autumnleap was clearly doing his best to maintain some composure by sitting in place, his pelt still bristled and his tail whipped passionately.

"You told me yourself what Sedgestar said that scum of a cat did to your mother," he hissed in a vicious low tone. "Why do you need to talk to a SkyClan elder to know that we can't trust him, and that he could behind all this? I still don't understand."

Frostmask shook her head.

"It's not just about what's going on with WindClan and ThunderClan anymore," she whispered back, her tail-tip twitching now too as if Autumnleap's restlessness was infectious. "I mean, that's really important too, don't get me wrong. But, I also need to know what happened to my mother. I won't be satisfied until I find out the truth."

Autumnleap blinked at her in concern. "You do realize that there's a decent chance that Birdstrike doesn't even know anything, right?

Well, maybe she does know something... but you told me how far gone her mind is. Will she be able to really communicate anything to you?"

Frostmask glanced away from him, scuffling her paws across the ground as the anxious energy rattled through her even more powerfully.

"I just don't want you to get your hopes up too much," Autumnleap added.

"I know." Frostmask heaved a sigh. "But, I have to *try* at least."

Autumnleap's tail continued to swish in long strokes from side to side, stirring up the dried pine needles. Obviously he was not completely convinced.

"And you really trust those two SkyClan cats to help you?" he pressed. "Why wouldn't they go just straight to Paledusk when you start sniffing around instead?"

Frostmask's belly twisted as Autumnleap put her biggest fears about her plan to words. But, she had no other choice but to trust Larchtail and Mottledflame. There was no other way she'd be able to get to Birdstrike.

"Larchtail and Mottledflame are my friends," Frostmask said. "Or, I certainly hope they are... We've at least helped each other in the past."

Autumnleap huffed, his claws flexing into the dirt.

"'Hope' alone isn't enough to keep you safe," he said critically.

Frostmask shot him a sharp glance, her pelt beginning to prickle in offense at his snippy tone. Autumnleap held her gaze for only a moment before he sighed, his eyes dropping to the ground.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a snake-heart. I'm just worried," he confessed. "With every new thing you tell me... Paledusk just seems more and more dangerous."

Frostmask softened and took a step forward, tucking her head under his chin and purring— half to comfort him and half to comfort herself.

"I know," she murmured into his white-furred chest. "I'm scared too. But, if it is Paledusk behind all this... things aren't going to be less dangerous if I bury my head back in the dirt and pretend like I don't know anything. We need to know the truth."

Autumnleap twisted his head so he could press his cheek to her forehead.

"Sometimes I wonder what I did that cursed me to fall in love with the cat who always finds herself in the thickest parts of trouble," he muttered, sounding melancholic and serious for only a moment before his tone shifted into teasing. "This isn't good for my nerves, you know. I'm certain the worry is taking moons off my life."

Frostmask released a weak huff of bitter laughter. "Imagine how *I* feel. At least you're with me by choice, but *I'm* stuck with myself."

Autumnleap snorted in amusement, but before he could respond, the sound of Sedgestar's yowl drifted over to them from the camp.

He must be summoning the cats on the gathering patrol.

Frostmask started to pull away from Autumnleap, but he hooked a paw around her side, pausing her before she could.

"Promise me that you'll be careful," he said urgently.

Frostmask *mrrowed* in quiet laughter. "Wasn't I the one telling *you* to be careful just last gathering?"

"Yes, but now you've infected me with your worry, and I hate it," Autumnleap said drily before his tone turned serious again. "But, just promise me, alright? Paledusk is going to be there. If he thinks you're on to him..."

"Paledusk is too smart to do anything at a gathering. There's far too many eyes and ears around," Frostmask pointed out. "But okay, I promise."

"Thank you," Autumnleap murmured, now allowing her to disentangled herself from him.

They padded back to camp together, slipping through the thorn tunnel. When they emerged, the gathering patrol was already grouped near the entrance. Autumnleap touched his nose to Frostmask's ear in a silent goodbye as he headed to the nursery.

Frostmask's worry melted away for a moment as instead her chest warmed with affection as she watched him slip inside the den. Mistkit and Newtkit had been left under Dewleaf's reliable care, but they would surely be wondering where Autumnleap and Frostmask had went by now. About a quarter moon ago, they'd begun to mew basic words and were now just moving on to stringing together rudimentary sentences. But, the novelty of them speaking had not yet worn off for Frostmask, and her heart still burned with wonder and love each time she padded inside the den and they squealed, *'Mama! Mama!'*

For a moment, longing to go over there and be with Autumnleap and their kits swept over Frostmask as powerfully as a flood. She *could* stay home from this gathering. Newtkit and Mistkit were a moon old by now, but that was still young enough that no one would question it.

Frostmask gave her ears a sudden shake, knocking the urge away.

What was she thinking? She couldn't miss this gathering. Figuring out what was going on with Paledusk, WindClan, and ThunderClan was far too important. Although Frostmask still felt a stab of disappoint as she turned aside, there was no hesitation in her step as she padded over to the patrol.

By doing this, I will be protecting my family, she reminded herself, her thoughts turning to WindClan's knowledge of Newtkit and Mistkit's origins. *...But what if Rabbitstar announces that they were born outside of ShadowClan in front of the whole gathering? Will all the clans turn on us?*

A shiver of apprehension ran through her pelt.

"Going to go grovel to ThunderClan at the gathering?" a hissed voice pulled Frostmask from her thoughts. "Or did you already roll over and show your belly to Acornear enough when you let him steal ShadowClan's prey right out from under your patrol's noses?"

A growl building in her throat, Frostmask whipped her muzzle around towards Dampfang. His dark pelt was nearly swallowed by the shadows of the thorn barrier as he glared at her from the edge of the camp. He was sitting alone— Dampfang hadn't been put on the gathering patrol. Even though Sedgestar had told Frostmask not to jump to conclusions about him too quickly, it didn't escape Frostmask's notice that her leader had still elected to not bring Dampfang along.

Frostmask clenched her jaw. She also had doubts about Dampfang's involvement now because of her building worry about Paledusk. But, although Dampfang might not have been involved with the trouble they were having with ThunderClan and WindClan, it was still clear that he was turning into his very own bigger and bigger problem. She and Sedgestar would have to address him one of these days. But, at least for right now, Frostmask had to focus on Paledusk.

"In the *very* slim chance that you ever get named deputy or leader, you can offer your opinions on ShadowClan's diplomatic matters," Frostmask snapped, turning away from Dampfang with a derisive lash of her tail. "But, I have more important things than you to deal with right now."

Frostmask could hear Dampfang growling behind her, but she strode off, finally joining Sedgestar at the head of the patrol.

"Ready?" Sedgestar asked, glancing at her from the corners of his eyes.

Frostmask nodded. With a swish of his tail, Sedgestar called the others to them, and they headed out of camp. As they began their trek to Fourtrees, Frostmask's irritation with Dampfang faded as anxiety returned to gnaw at her. She leaned over towards Sedgestar.

"I was just thinking about something... what do we do if Rabbitstar

says anything about Newtkit and Mistkit?" she asked.

"Deny," Sedgestar meowed curtly. "Rabbitstar has no proof of anything. These are vicious rumors he's made up to try to defame ShadowClan, nothing more."

Frostmask bowed her head in acceptance, although her pelt still prickled uneasily. She was confident in her and Sedgestar's ability to hide ShadowClan's secrets, but that didn't change the fact that this gathering would be an uncomfortable and hostile one. She took a deep breath, preparing herself for it.

But, as they padded through the quiet woods for Fourtrees, Frostmask's worries about the gathering didn't abate— only grew. Her plan felt like it rested on luck as thin and delicate as a cobweb. Everything depended on either Larchtail or Mottledflame being at the gathering; she could trust no other SkyClan cat with her request.

But what if they weren't there? What would Frostmask do if she had to wait longer to speak to Birdstrike? Could she even afford to wait for next full moon? It didn't feel like it. But trying to sneak into SkyClan's territory to find them felt too risky.

But maybe I'll get lucky. Frostmask thought, trying to force some optimism.

If she was *really* lucky, maybe Birdstrike herself would be in attendance, although Frostmask doubted it. She hadn't seen Birdstrike at a gathering in moons.

Frostmask's brow furrowed deeply, a new disturbing thought dawning on her.

...Is Birdstrike even still alive?

She probably just hadn't been at the gatherings because of her age and failing memory, right? Fennelstar had never announced her death at least. But, if Birdstrike was dead... what would Frostmask do then?

Frostmask shook her ears to dislodge the worry before it blossomed

into a full-blown anxiety attack. She could think about that now. She would just have to deal with it if it happened.

While she'd been distracted with her thoughts, Frostmask's paws had been busy following Sedgestar and the others in their patrol to Fourtrees, and now the gathering hollow lay beneath them. Shadowed forms darted around at the base of the slope. Like a disturbed pile of ants, their movements were swift and erratic— Frostmask wasn't the only anxious one tonight.

She opened her jaws and let the scents on the breeze settle on her tongue. She was greeted by two twin forest scents, only differentiated by the edge of a musty, nuttier smell on one and the fresher, windblown trees on the other.

ThunderClan and SkyClan are the only ones here. No wonder they seem so uneasy.

Sedgestar signaled ShadowClan forward, and they streamed down into the hollow. Frostmask slowed her paws deliberately, dropping back from Sedgestar and slipping away from her Clanmates as they ducked through the dense ring of undergrowth around the clearing. She didn't want Sedgestar to sweep her away to the Great Rock with the other deputies and leaders before she got the chance to look for Larchtail and Mottledflame.

Sticking to the edges of the clearing where the shadows were darkest, Frostmask trotted around the hollow. She found the area where SkyClan was easily. They had broken up into smaller groups to talk amongst themselves, but they weren't mingling with ThunderClan— although that was hardly unusual.

The silhouettes were silver-edged with moonlight, and Frostmask scanned them, searching for familiar figures. There was no trace of Birdstrike's matted grey and white pelt, but when Frostmask's eyes settled on a pair of warriors talking alone, her heart leapt as she recognized Larchtail's tabby coat and Mottledflame's tortoiseshell one. She truly was lucky tonight.

Silently thanking StarClan, Frostmask padded up to the couple. Although she didn't like risking drawing attention to herself and

catching the eye of Paledusk, she had no choice but to broach the SkyClan cats' area to reach them.

RiverClan, though, chose that moment to arrive. The appearance of the sleek-furred warriors with their pelts sparkling with water droplets and their loud, easy laughter was enough of a disturbance that surely no one would notice Frostmask's one shadowed figure slipping into SkyClan's ranks and heading up to Larchtail and Mottledflame.

Mottledflame's gaze flickered to Frostmask first, and a welcoming purr rose in their throat.

"It's good to see you, Frostmask," Mottledflame greeted her warmly. "It's been a while."

"Well she's been busy, right?" Larchtail said with a friendly blink as Frostmask reached them.

Frostmask sighed, giving her ears a small shake as the weight of her stress seemed to press down on her even harder than before.

"More than you could ever guess," she said, a sardonic edge entering her meow.

"Congratulations on the kits, by the way," Mottledflame said. "We heard the news from the last gathering. What are their names?"

Frostmask puffed out her chest, and the pride that rushed through her was so strong that the reason she even came to speak to Mottledflame and Larchtail in the first place was pushed to the back of her mind.

"Mistkit and Newtkit," Frostmask purred. "They are so cute. Mistkit is a sweet grey, fluffy little tom, and Newtkit a fiery tortoiseshell she-cat— ginger spotted just like the salamanders."

Larchtail lolled her tongue out, mischief sparking in her eyes. "Mistkit and Newtkit huh? Only a ShadowClan cat would wear the name of a creature that crawls with its belly in the mud like a mark of honor!"

Mottledflame thwacked their tail across their mate's flank.

"Larchtail! Don't be rude!" Mottledflame hissed under their breath.

"Frostmask's knows I'm only teasing!" Larchtail protested, rumbling a purr and turning her gaze back to Frostmask's. "They sound adorable."

Mottledflame nodded, and Frostmask began to purr as well.

"Thank you," she said, although her purr began to fade as the purpose of her speaking to them came back to her. "But, I didn't come here just to talk... I actually have a favor to ask."

Larchtail and Mottledflame blinked at her, their expressions equally intrigued as they were uncertain. The thought of ShadowClan's deputy asking them for a favor clearly made them uneasy, but Frostmask didn't blame them for their hesitance— she felt it too.

Frostmask glanced from side to side to make sure there was no chance of being overheard before she took a deep breath. She'd carefully thought through the series of partial truths she'd share with Larchtail and Mottledflame when she'd devised this plan, but now that the moment was upon her, she wasn't sure if she should go through with it. Autumnleap was right that she was taking a risk sharing anything with these two SkyClan warriors.

But what other choice do I have?

Frostmask steeled herself.

"Since I've become a mother, I've been thinking a lot more about my own," she said. "My mother was a rogue who died when I was quite young— you know that I was born outside of the Clans. I thought that any information about her would have been lost to me because of that, but recently I found something out. My mother wasn't as unfamiliar to the Clans as I once thought... She once knew a cat named Slatewhisker."

Larchtail jolted as Frostmask uttered the name, every hair on her short tabby pelt suddenly standing on end.

"...Slatewhisker?" she whispered, her eyes as round as the full moon above them. "Your mother knew my father?"

"How did you learn this?" Mottledflame asked, their hazel eyes narrowing in confusion.

"I ran into a rogue at the far edge of ShadowClan's border," Frostmask lied. "He mistook me for May— my mother... I look like her. Anyway, apparently this cat knew the both of them, and he told me they were friends."

"What?" Larchtail whispered, shooting a troubled glance at Mottledflame.

Mottledflame scooted closer to her to brush their tail against her side comfortingly.

"I remembered you telling me that Paledusk was Slatewhisker's brother, Larchtail," Frostmask continued quickly, hoping that the shock about Slatewhisker and May wasn't so great that it would prevent Larchtail from listening to the rest of the story. "So I thought Paledusk might be able to tell me something about my mother. But, he refused to speak to me about anything related to Slatewhisker."

"That sounds like Paledusk," Mottledflame muttered under their breath.

"But then I remembered Birdstrike." Frostmask turned appealing eyes first onto Larchtail, then Mottledflame, then back again. "Birdstrike has seemed to have recognized me before. Larchtail, you said she sometimes thinks you're your mother. What if she also thinks I'm *mine?* I'd like to be able to talk to her to ask her some questions about my mother. She's the only other cat who might know something about her. Could you arrange a meeting between me and her?"

For several long heartbeats, Larchtail and Mottledflame were dead silent, their brows furrowed and troubled. Mottledflame finally spoke first.

"Why did you not ask the rogue for more information about your mother?" they said.

Frostmask blinked, silently scolding herself for not anticipating that obvious question.

"I— I never saw him again," she said, quickly coming up with the lie. "He was chased off by my clan-mates very soon after I spoke with him. So he left the area, or died, or... I don't know. But, if he's out there, I have no way of finding him. I didn't even get his name."

"Birdstrike will hardly be more useful," Larchtail finally said, her voice rough and rasping in the back of her throat. "Her body may be here, but her mind is as gone as that rogue. She hardly knows where she is or even what time she's in."

Frostmask turned her gaze back to Larchtail, dismayed at the hardness that had entered her expression.

"I'd like to at least try," she said, trying to keep desperation from creeping into her voice. "Please. Maybe if she sees me again, it'll uncover a memory about my mother. Maybe it will even bring back her memories of your father too."

"You're also asking us to sneak an ill elder out of camp to meet with the deputy of an enemy Clan," Larchtail continued as if she hadn't heard her, her harsh gaze narrowing.

"But, you can trust me!" Frostmask protested, a bit of hurt flickering in her chest. "I would never hurt Birdstrike, you know that."

"Still," Larchtail grunted, avoiding Frostmask's eyes. "It looks bad. We could get in serious trouble if anyone caught us."

"...But no cat would protest us taking your grandmother out of camp so she could stretch her legs," Mottledflame said slowly.

Larchtail's muzzle whipped around so she could stare at her mate, her jaw falling open in shock.

"Don't tell me that you're seriously considering this!" Larchtail hissed in a low voice.

Mottledflame met Larchtail's eyes unflinchingly. "Maybe we *should* consider it. I know how much and for how long Slatewhisker's disappearance has plagued you. Frostmask is right— if Birdstrike has the answers to her questions about her parent, maybe she has the answers to your questions as well. Maybe she can tell us what happened to him."

Larchtail pinned her ears back.

"If Birdstrike had any answers, she had moons to give them to me, in the comfort of our own camp," she said, a soft growl under her words.

"But it's as Frostmask said," Mottledflame said with a nod to Frostmask. "Birdstrike needs something to bring her mind back to the right time."

Larchtail's claws flexed into the ground, but now she seemed less upset at the idea and more upset in general, her eyes growing cloudy as she turned inward.

"If what Frostmask says about Slatewhisker knowing May and that other rogue is true, then maybe I don't want any answers," Larchtail muttered. "Maybe Slatewhisker really did abandon us and run away to become a kittypet, like they say."

Mottledflame gently touched their muzzle to one of Larchtail's ears.

"Well, we won't ever know for sure until we find out the truth," they said.

Frostmask shifted her weight from paw to paw, growing antsy. As they'd been talking, WindClan had appeared. Now the gathering hollow was completely full with cats from all five clans mingling. The leader's announcements would likely be starting soon, and Sedgestar would have her tail if she wasn't in the deputy's place at the foot of the Great Rock before then.

"I need to go before the announcements begin," she said, interrupting something that Mottledflame was murmuring to Larchtail in a low voice. "If you decide that you want to, come to

Fourtrees with Birdstrike tomorrow at sunhigh. I'll be here. But, if you don't come, I understand. It was good to talk to you both anyway."

Frostmask was relieved that Larchtail still called out a quiet goodbye along with Mottledflame as Frostmask turned and hurried towards the Great Rock. Thankfully, her plan had not upset Larchtail so much that she was unwilling to continue to be friendly with Frostmask.

So maybe that means that Mottledflame will be able to convince her.

Frostmask did her best to put thoughts of them out of her mind so that she could concentrate on her other problems as she approached the Great Rock. She could see that the five leaders were already perched on the top of the massive bolder. Her pelt prickled self-consciously as her gaze met Sedgestar's and he narrowed his amber eyes in an almost imperceptible disapproving look. She'd surely be scolded for sneaking off from him later. Her gaze drifted from Sedgestar over the other leaders, taking in Willowstar's ever-unruffled form, and Morningstar, who looked even more worn-down that usual, before finally reaching Rabbitstar. The WindClan's lip curled up to show his fangs when he glanced down and caught Frostmask's gaze, his eyes glinting mockingly.

I know your secret, rogue, his gaze seemed to say. *And soon all the Clans will too.*

Frostmask's belly twisted in a mixture of anger and fear for her kits, but she could do nothing to Rabbitstar now, besides furiously wrench her gaze away from him. Her eyes finally came to a rest on Fennelstar, and a fresh rush of anxiety filled her.

Fennelstar looked even worse than he had when she'd last saw him a few moons ago. Of course she'd heard from Sedgestar that he'd still seemed sick at the last gathering, but even that warning couldn't have prepared her for Fennelstar's haggard appearance. The flesh had been sapped from the old leader's bones, and even his long, bushy coat couldn't disguise the shape of his skeleton. His flanks were hollowed out and his broad shoulders jutted up sharply from his back as he hunched on the boulder. It seemed almost a

miracle that he'd been able to make it onto the Great Rock at all.

The SkyClan leader's eyes were half-lidded, and he panted softly, although he wasn't doing anything more strenuous than sitting.

Fennelstar will be dead soon. Frostmask thought, the realization hitting her like a boulder. *And Paledusk will be SkyClan's leader.*

She swallowed, but suddenly found her tongue dry. If it was Paledusk who was causing all the trouble ShadowClan was facing with ThunderClan and WindClan now only as a deputy, how much more threatening would he be when he was a leader and had the uncontested might of SkyClan behind him?

As she reached the foot of the Great Rock, Frostmask's eyes were pulled to his pale white pelt almost against her will. She found him already watching her, his green gaze as bright as ever. Frostmask willed herself to be calm. The most important thing was to make sure that Paledusk didn't find out that she suspected him of anything. But it would be difficult. Frostmask knew Paledusk was perceptive and clever— in fact, if what she feared about him was true, he may even be the most terrifyingly clever cat she'd ever met.

Frostmask, though, had training. Sedgestar had taught her a lot, albeit sometimes inadvertently on his part, on how to hide her true feelings.

And I've learned from Paledusk too, Frostmask realized with a small jolt. *Every time I tried to hide some secret about ShadowClan from him. And also when he's warned me about my clan-mates, encouraging me to be wary of them or of Sedgestar.*

If she could gather up every scrap of her experience and training, Frostmask just might be able to hide even something as big as this from Paledusk's sharp gaze.

Frostmask kept careful control over her breathing, keeping it smooth and even as she took her place at the foot of the Great Rock. She sat at the end of the line, with only Paledusk on her left side as she put the boulder at her back and faced the crowd.

"I was wondering where you were," Paledusk murmured from the corner of his mouth.

"I was just talking with Larchtail and Mottledflame," Frostmask said. "It's been too long since I've seen them."

There was no sense in lying about her meeting with the two SkyClan warriors, especially not since Paledusk could have easily seen her doing so.

"Ah I see," Paledusk said. "I'd begun to think that you stayed home from this gathering again."

"I wouldn't miss this one," Frostmask responded. "Not with tensions so high."

"Did something happen then? With WindClan or ThunderClan?" Paledusk asked.

Frostmask risked a glance over at him. Paledusk's expression was one of muted concern, as if carefully controlled because of the eyes that could be on them... Or was the concern muted because it was manufactured, and he already knew the reason of ShadowClan's troubles? Frostmask searched for anything else hidden in Paledusk's face— any hint that he already knew more about what was going on, but she found nothing.

"We have had some problems with WindClan and ThunderClan, yes," Frostmask said.

Paledusk's eyes darkened a fraction.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

As his expression remained authentic, uncertainty and doubt began creeping into Frostmask's mind.

Could he really be the cause of all this? Or has he just been trying to help me this whole time?

Frostmask blinked, pushing the thoughts away and strengthening her resolve.

But, that doesn't change the fact that his story about May doesn't match with Sedgestar's. Either Paledusk is lying or Sedgestar is. I still need to speak to Birdstrike because I need to know the truth. Otherwise I will never know who to trust.

The curiosity Frostmask had felt about her history, her family, her mother, for her entire life finally made sense now— it was where this had all started. Unless she understood the past, the future would remain fogged forever.

"Is ShadowClan faring well against them?" Paledusk asked, pulling Frostmask out of her thoughts. "My offer still stands if you need help."

Frostmask hesitated. She couldn't seriously consider any sort of alliance with Paledusk or SkyClan when her suspicions of him were so great, but she couldn't risk provoking him if she dismissed him too carelessly.

Frostmask drew her gaze away from Paledusk, allowing her eyes to skim pointedly over the crowd.

"We have been having some trouble," she admitted, allowing her voice to drop to a low whisper. "But, let's not discuss it now— too many prying ears here. We can talk about details at our next meeting."

They had last agreed to meet again at the waxing half-moon, which was now only quarter moon away. Hopefully that would buy Frostmask enough time for her to figure out what was going on.

Frostmask's belly clenched.

As long as Larchtail and Mottledflame come with Birdstrike tomorrow...

"Of course," Paledusk said quickly. "Excellent idea..."

Anything else Paledusk had been trying to say was drowned out when Willowstar released a loud yowl, signaling the start of the leader's announcements.

"Welcome all to this green-leaf gathering!" Willowstar said as the

chattering from the crowd died out. "RiverClan will begin the announcements. We are continuing to thrive on the bountiful fish from the river. Our kits continue to grow and our apprentices continue to train, becoming stronger. But, besides that I have little else to report."

Willowstar stepped back with a small, gracious dip of her head to the other leaders. Morningstar strode forward to take her place, his shoulders stiff. Frostmask's stomach grew heavy with dread as she noticed the sharp glare he sent Sedgestar. Frostmask tried to glance over at Acornear, but the ThunderClan deputy was gazing out over the crowd. Frostmask couldn't tell if he was ignoring her on purpose or not.

"ThunderClan will speak next," Morningstar growled as he braced himself at the front of the boulder. "Our Clan is thriving despite hostilities at our borders."

Frostmask's pelt prickled as Morningstar turned to glare right at Sedgestar, his lips curling back into a snarl. "ShadowClan has continued to blatantly trespass and steal our prey despite Sedgestar's reassurances otherwise."

Hisses of support rose from the ThunderClan warriors in the crowd, and Frostmask spotted some of her clan-mates' pelts bristling. Sedgestar, though, only reacted with his eyes narrowing a fraction as he held Morningstar's gaze.

"ThunderClan will tolerate this disrespect no longer," Morningstar rumbled, his voice dropping to a low, ominous growl as his board shoulders hunched. "Put an end to this now, Sedgestar, or suffer the consequences."

"Those are bold threats for a leader who hasn't seen a hair of a ShadowClan cat on ThunderClan land," Sedgestar said, his lip twitching in a hint of a snarl. "Unlike ThunderClan, I might add, who was caught in the act on ShadowClan territory with ShadowClan prey in their mouths."

Morningstar's ears pinned back, and his pupils blew out in rage.

"We were only paying you back in kind!" he snarled. "And, don't play dumb with me, Sedgestar. We all know ShadowClan's tricks. I don't need more proof than I have— ShadowClan scent trails and prey blood! I haven't forgotten back in leaf-bare when ShadowClan decided to treat SkyClan's lands as their own hunting grounds. Why would you fox-hearts not have done the same to us?"

Frostmask clenched her jaw, biting back a snarl of outrage.

Because ShadowClan has been nothing but ThunderClan's loyal friend for seasons!

She wondered if Sedgestar was thinking the same thing— if he also felt a sting of betrayal, no matter how faint, as Morningstar turned against them. But, if her leader did feel it, he didn't show it. It was only anger that creased Sedgestar's expression, although Frostmask could tell from his locked jaw that he was struggling against it. Perhaps he was still clinging to a fragile thread of hope that diplomacy could prevail. After all, they had already decided that it would be best to avoid a battle with ThunderClan, if possible.

"Firstly, ShadowClan never trespassed on SkyClan land," Sedgestar said icily, despite the disbelieving snort from Fennelstar.

Morningstar too didn't seem to believe ShadowClan's leader. He rolled his eyes, but then Sedgestar caught his gaze and stared at him intently, his amber gaze burning through Morningstar.

"And, secondly, you should trust me because I give you my word," Sedgestar rumbled. "Because you once called ShadowClan your honorable ally, and we've fought at ThunderClan's side many, *many* times."

Morningstar sized Sedgestar up, his blue eyes darkening like the sky before a storm.

"Well, maybe I misjudged you," he growled. "Maybe those old elder tales are right, and the north winds do make ShadowClanners' hearts as cold as ice."

Loud jeers rose up from the crowd, and Frostmask stiffened as she

realized it wasn't only ThunderClan deriding them. There were cats from SkyClan, WindClan, *and* RiverClan mocking ShadowClan, flashing their fangs at her clan-mates. Frostmask's gaze scanned the crowd. Dustleap was snarling back at a nearby SkyClan cat. Pineshade was hissing at a ThunderClanner. And, Frostmask couldn't stop her claws from sliding out as she spotted Lizardstrike being forced away from a group of hostile young warriors from RiverClan, SkyClan, and WindClan with swats and hisses, making him retreat to where Larkfoot, Redclaw, and Snakeeyes sat together.

All of four of the clans are turning against us! Frostmask thought, fear and despair flooding through her.

Frostmask sent a desperate glance up at her leader, hoping he would do something to turn away the hurricane that was building against ShadowClan. But even Sedgestar looked unsettled, his shoulder fur bristling and his claws scraping against the stone beneath him.

Frostmask's gaze scanned the other leaders, wondering if any of them would do anything about it. But, Willowstar just looked faintly amused. There was a pleased gleam in Fennelstar's eyes despite his sickly appearance. And, Rabbitstar seemed down-right smug.

"It is a bit embarrassing that it took you so long to notice ShadowClan's treachery since it is such an obvious fact, Morningstar," Rabbitstar cut in, his tail held high and waving slightly as he sauntered up to the front of the Great Rock. "It should have been made clear from the moment Sedgestar appointed a rogue without a drop of clan-blood as deputy."

Rabbitstar glanced down at her, that knowing glint back in his eyes, and cold dread rushed through Frostmask's body as if she'd been dunked in an icy river.

He knows about Mistkit and Newtkit. If he reveals their true outsider parentage now when tensions are so high, that could be the final push the other Clans need to declare war against ShadowClan, no matter how we deny it!

"There is something else everyone should know about Sedgestar's and Frostmask's deceit!" Rabbitstar hissed, sweeping his gaze over the crowd.

Frostmask clenched the ground tightly beneath her claws, bracing for the outrage to break out and swamp her Clan.

Rabbitstar opened his jaws to continue, but the only sound that echoed through Fourtrees' hollow was the bone-shaking *boom* of thunder. Sudden darkness fell over the clearing, and Frostmask glanced up to see rolling storm clouds had covered the moon.

"StarClan is angry at all the vicious lies that have been levied against ShadowClan tonight!" Sedgestar yowled quickly. "They have covered the moon! This gathering is over!"

He was only a flicker in the darkness as he leapt down from the boulder, but Frostmask rushed to his side. Intense relief washed over her alongside the pouring rain that started to patter on her back.

"It is not us who StarClan is angry with!" Rabbitstar hissed in response. "It's *you,* Sedgestar!"

Frostmask shot a glance over her shoulder. He was the only leader left standing on the Great Rock. Morningstar had already stormed over to his clan-mates, Acornear shadowing him, and taken them out of Fourtrees. Willowstar and Perchpelt were striding away with their Clan too, but Fennelstar and Paledusk were still at the foot of the boulder, their heads bent together as they spoke to each other.

It was Willowstar who glanced back at Rabbitstar.

"Regardless of who StarClan is angry with, this gathering is finished Rabbitstar," she said. "There's no use in angering our ancestors more by lingering. Take your cats home."

Rabbitstar gave a wordless hiss, his tail lashing in frustration, but he finally sprung off the boulder at her prompting, calling WindClan to him.

Frostmask and Sedgestar reached their clan-mates, and Sedgestar

silently gathered them up. Despite the worry in her clan-mates' expressions, Frostmask still relaxed as their familiar pelts brushed against hers, although their reassuring touches weren't nearly enough to drive away all her fear.

Frostmask glanced over her shoulder one final time before they left the hollow. She easily spotted Paledusk's white pelt in the darkness as he aided a limping Fennelstar over to his clan-mates. Frostmask's gaze flickered from Paledusk's pelt over to the shadowed forms she could barely make out as Larchtail and Mottledflame before moving back again to Paledusk.

Her claws sunk into the muddy ground as tension coiled her muscles into knots.

It was obvious now that ShadowClan had lost their closest ally in ThunderClan, and Rabbitstar indeed knew the truth about Mistkit and Newtkit. That meant it was more important now than ever that Frostmask figure out what the truth was. Could Paledusk really be the source of all this conflict, or was there a traitor in ShadowClan? Solving one piece of the mystery relied firmly on her being able to speak to Birdstrike about Paledusk.

Frostmask's eyes turned back to Mottledflame and Larchtail. StarClan seemed to have been looking out for ShadowClan tonight, with them sending the storm when they did. Maybe with a little more help from StarClan, or just plain good luck, Larchtail and Mottledflame would pull through too.

Frostmask's gaze rose to the stormy sky.

Please let Larchtail and Mottledflame come here with Birdstrike tomorrow, Frostmask sent out the silent prayer, her heart clenching in desperation. *Because ShadowClan doesn't seem to have much time left.*

Truths

"Don't you want to come out to congratulate Minnowpaw, Marigoldpaw, and Mallowpaw?" Frostmask meowed temptingly.

Two pairs of large murky, kitten-blue eyes peered at her from the shadows under the thorn bush, blinking as they stared out at camp and the three freshly named apprentices.

Minnowpaw, Marigoldpaw, and Mallowpaw stood next to their mentors, Snakeeyes, Dustleap, and Murmurstep respectively, still basking in the Clan's attention after their ceremony.

Frostmask couldn't help but feeling proud for them too. ShadowClan's apprentice den had been empty for too long, and Frostmask was satisfied with the mentors she and Sedgestar had picked out for their Clan's newest trainees. Dustleap with his serious and rational disposition would do well tempering Marigoldpaw's more mischievous and impulsive nature— there was no way that adventurous young tom would be sneaking out of camp again under his new mentor's watch. Minnowpaw was shy, but Snakeeyes was the perfect cat to coast the her out of her shell. And, Murmurstep had worked so hard to prove herself ready to be a mentor. She would do well training her younger sister, Mallowpaw.

Although, a part of Frostmask wondered if last night's disaster of a gathering was part of the reason Sedgestar assigned them mentors so swiftly this morning. ShadowClan needed all of the warriors and warriors-in-training that they could get right now.

Shaking off her worry, Frostmask turned her attention back to Mistkit and Newtkit, taking in their hesitant expressions.

"Come on, the camp's not scary," she encouraged.

"I'm not scared!" Newtkit retorted, her orange-and-black ears flattening in a pout, but she still didn't take a single step out of the shelter of the nursery.

However, her gaze did linger enviously on Lichenkit, Sprucekit, Mudkit, and Fogkit as they pranced around their former den-mates. Marigoldpaw, Mallowpaw, and Minnowpaw had their chests puffed out as if they weren't kits themselves only moments ago, basking in the younger litter's congratulations and excitement.

Frostmask purred to herself, her heart warming in fondness. She remembered own apprentice ceremony, when Murmurstep and Mosspounce had been so excited for it to be theirs next. Although, Poolcloud and Dewleaf's litter still had a bit of a wait— three more moons— until it would be time for them to become apprentices.

After a few more moments, Dewleaf's four kits were ushered back towards the nursery as the older litter were swept away by their mentors, off to tour the territory for the first time. Sprucekit was scowling faintly as she trailed after her littermates, having to be repeatedly nudged by Dewleaf back towards the nursery.

"I think I could be an apprentice now!" Sprucekit was saying. "I'm as big as Minnowkit!"

"No, you're not," Dewleaf chided gently.

"Yes, I am!" Sprucekit protested, her ears flattening in a pout.

Dewleaf shot Frostmask an exasperated glance, and Frostmask purred, her whiskers twitching in amusement. Sprucekit took after Poolcloud with her size, and it was true that she was the largest in her litter. But, the kit was still nowhere the size of a six moon old apprentice.

"You still have quite a bit of growing left to do," Dewleaf said, trying another tactic.

"No, I don't!" Sprucekit argued.

Dewleaf sighed.

"You're delusional, my sweet tadpole," she said, rasping her tongue over Sprucekit's forehead.

Sprucekit's scowl deepened.

"What's 'delusional?'" Fogkit piped up, blinking curiously.

"It means Sprucekit believes things that are not true," Lichenkit broke in, shooting Sprucekit a look from narrowed amber eyes. "Like that she's ready to be a warrior apprentice right now."

Sprucekit's dark pelt bristled in offense, and she turned on her sister. "At least I'm not as *delusional* as you, Lichenkit, because you've been acting like you're a medicine cat apprentice for moons!"

"That's because Elmclaw has let me help him for moons," Lichenkit stated matter-of-factly.

Sprucekit lashed her tail.

"That's only because Mom and Dad didn't want you to keep eating weird plants, so they got Elmclaw to watch you!" she snapped. "Elmclaw's just your kit-sitter! He probably doesn't even want you as his apprentice."

Lichenkit's ears flattened, and her lips curled up in a snarl. "That's not true, frog-brain!"

"Kits, that's enough!" Dewleaf interrupted, her tone sharp. "No one is delusional! Stars, I was only joking. Sprucekit, stop being so mean. Elmclaw isn't Lichenkit's kit-sitter. And, Lichenkit, I'm sure Elmclaw would be happy to take you on as his apprentice, if that's what you want. But, the fact of the matter is no one is becoming an apprentice until they are six moons old, and that's that!"

Sprucekit huffed, her tail-tip flicking, and Lichenkit just silently stalked past her, brushing past Mistkit and Newtkit's faces to duck into the nursery.

"Hey Sprucekit, come practice the hunting crouch with me and Fogkit!" Mudkit called to her. "We can show Marigoldpaw, Minnowpaw, and Mallowpaw when they get back from patrolling!"

Sprucekit padded over to them, although her ears were still angled back irritably. Dewleaf sighed and gave her head a small shake. She took a seat next to Frostmask, but her eyes followed Sprucekit.

"I know she's just annoyed right now about not being an apprentice yet, but she can be so moody these days," Dewleaf murmured to her. "And, it seems like she and Lichenkit are always arguing. Even when Sprucekit's in a good mood, she likes to tease, and Lichenkit takes everything so literally... Sometimes I wonder if they even like each other at all." Dewleaf sighed again. "All of them were so much less difficult when they were younger."

"They're littermates. Of course they'll fight sometimes," Frostmask said, blinking gently at her friend. "That doesn't mean that they don't care about each other. Just look at Pineshade and Autumnleap."

One of Dewleaf's ears flicked thoughtfully.

"Or, me and Dampfang, I suppose," she muttered. "No matter our differences, we're still kin."

Frostmask's good mood faltered for a moment at the mention of Dampfang. When they'd gotten home from the gathering last night after the storm had broken, Sedgestar had called a Clan meeting. He'd explained the hostility ShadowClan had faced from all of the other Clans to their clan-mates that had stayed home, and when Dampfang spoke up this time, he and his supporters had been even more vocal about Frostmask putting ShadowClan at risk by remaining deputy.

The tip of Frostmask's tail twitched against the ground, her belly rolling with worry and frustration.

I doubt me being deputy is really ShadowClan's biggest problem. The real issue is whoever is stirring up the tensions between the Clans and making everything worse! I need to figure the cat behind all this before situation with us,ThunderClan, and WindClan, or any of the others deteriorates more. Or, before Dampfang turns my own clan-mates against me.

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake, trying to dislodge her growing despair.

Mottledflame and Larchtail need to come with Birdstrike to Fourtrees today! I need answers from her. What will I do if they don't show up?

"Hey look!" Sprucekit's loud voice cut through Frostmask's thoughts. "Are the little kits going to finally come out and play?"

Frostmask blinked, her gaze finding Sprucekit crouched down and peering down at Newtkit and Mistkit, who remained hovering just inside the den's entrance.

"Come on! We'll teach you the hunter's crouch!" Sprucekit encouraged.

She stalked forward a few steps in demonstration and batted at the bramble bush's leaves just above Newtkit and Mistkit's head. Newtkit let out a soft hiss as small shredded pieces of leaves fell down on her and Mistkit.

"Stop it, Sprucekit!" she said, swiping the leaves off her nose before turning to Mistkit and brushing them off him.

"Come out, and you won't get leaves on you," Sprucekit pointed out, her whiskers quivering in amusement. "Unless you're *scared."*

Newtkit's chin jutted out stubbornly.

"We're not," she insisted, Mistkit nodding in agreement.

"Then why don't you—"

"Sprucekit," Dewleaf broke in, her expression tired at having to reprimand her daughter for a second time in such quick succession. "Mistkit and Newtkit will come out in their own time. Stop pestering them."

Sprucekit straightened, turning to look back at her mother.

"But they're been in the nursery *forever!"* she protested. "We were younger than them when we came out, right?"

"Yes, but different litters do things at their own pace," Frostmask spoke up gently. "Besides, it hasn't been *that* long. They're only a little over a moon old."

Sprucekit's blue-green gaze flickered between Frostmask and

Dewleaf, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"But why can't their pace be *now?"* she asked. "Don't they want to play in the camp? Is there something *wrong* with them? Dampfang said they don't have Clan-blood so they can't do things right, like we—"

As Sprucekit spoke, a white-hot, protective anger flared in Frostmask's chest. She jerked to her paws, her jaw clenched and pelt bristling, and Sprucekit cut off. Despite her anger, Frostmask's love for Sprucekit was enough to keep her silent instead of allowing her fury at Dampfang and the poisonous ideas that he put in the kit's head spill out onto her.

Sprucekit is still so young— she can't fully understand what she's saying.

Sprucekit crouched, wide-eyed and frozen under the heat of Frostmask's gaze.

"I'll talk to her," Dewleaf murmured, brushing her tail reassuringly against Frostmask's side, and Frostmask realized at that she was on her paws now too. Dewleaf nodded towards the nursery. "You should talk to them."

Frostmask blinked, her eyes finally tearing off of Sprucekit to move back to the nursery's entrance. But, it was empty now. Newtkit and Mistkit must have retreated back into the den.

"Sprucekit, come here," Dewleaf called, her voice laced with disappointment.

Sprucekit at least seemed to know that she had done something wrong because for the first time today, she actually looked contrite. She obeyed Dewleaf without protest, her head and tail held low and her ears flat.

"I'm sorry," Sprucekit whispered, stopping Frostmask as she passed her on the way to the nursery. "I didn't mean to say... I don't want Newtkit and Mistkit to hate me. I just wasn't thinking."

Sprucekit peered up at her with round, guilty eyes, and Frostmask sighed, the rest of her anger ebbing.

"You can apologize to them later," she muttered. "Go talk to your mother now."

Frostmask turned and slipped into the nursery. The first cat that greeted her was Lichenkit, sitting still and wide-eyed like an owl near the entrance.

"They're upset," she said, her ears angling towards two small lumps huddled together in the back of the den. "Sprucekit was mean to them."

Frostmask sighed again.

"I know, Lichenkit," Frostmask murmured. "Can you do me a favor and fetch Autumnleap? He's somewhere in camp."

Lichenkit nodded solemnly. She rose to her paws and left the den, leaving only Frostmask and her kits inside. Frostmask padded over to them. Newtkit was glaring down at her paws as Mistkit licked her head repeatedly in a soothing gesture. Both of them turned wide eyes onto Frostmask as she lay down, her tail wrapping around them.

"Why did Spucekit say that?" Mistkit meowed in a quiet voice.

"Yeah! There's nothing wrong!" Newtkit hissed, burrowing her face into Frostmask's pelt. "...Right Mama?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," Frostmask soothed, bending her head to rasp her tongue over Newtkit's prickling ginger and black fur before doing the same to Mistkit's grey pelt. "You will come out of the nursery when you're ready."

The kits were quiet for a long couple of moments.

"I don't... I don't want to come out," Newtkit mumbled the confession into Frostmask's fur. "I'm scared. Does that mean Sprucekit is right?"

"No, it doesn't mean that," Frostmask said firmly. "But, you don't need to be scared. Autumnleap and I will always protect you. Poolcloud, Dewleaf, and Pineshade will too."

Newtkit was silent, her face still hidden in Frostmask's pelt.

"Why are you scared?" Frostmask prompted.

Autumnleap slipped into the den at that moment. She blinked at him in a silent greeting as he settled down at her side.

"Lichenkit told me what happened," he murmured in Frostmask's ear.

Frostmask gave him a small nod before turning her attention back to her still-quiet kits.

"Well?" she prompted.

"I don't want to go without Newtkit," Mistkit murmured. "And Newtkit doesn't want to go."

"Newtkit?" Autumnleap asked, giving her small, tortoiseshell side a nudge with his muzzle as she continued to hide her face in Frostmask's pelt.

"It's... it's a bad feeling," Newtkit's voice was barely above a whisper. "I don't know... The nursery is safe."

"The camp is safe too," Autumnleap said.

Newtkit peeked out of Frostmask's pelt slightly. "But, I've been outside before, and it was bad."

Frostmask blinked hard a few times, her concern and confusion growing in her chest as she exchanged a baffled look with Autumnleap. Had Newtkit left the nursery before, and they not realized? Had something happened to her?

The fur on the back of Frostmask's neck bristled as a horrifying concept occurred to her.

Did Dampfang do something, or say something to her?!

"What do you mean, tadpole?" Frostmask murmured to Newtkit, managing to keep her mew quiet and gentle despite the tension

knotting inside her.

"The outside," Newtkit explained, her ears flattening. "I'm there when I sleep."

Autumnleap's head tilted to the side as he tried to understand.

"Do you mean you have dreams of being outside?" he asked, his voice soft.

Newtkit gave a nod.

"It's scary," she said in a small mew, curling in on herself more tightly.

Frostmask's brow furrowed in confusion, and she tucked her tail over her kits a bit more to comfort them.

Could it be possible that Newtkit remembered, at least on some level, the time she'd been outside of the ShadowClan nursery when she and Mistkit were newborns? Was that what was giving her nightmares?

"But, we've not been outside before?" Mistkit said, the statement coming out more like a question, as if he wasn't quite sure of it himself.

Frostmask exchanged another look with Autumnleap. When they'd first took the kits in, they'd decided that they wouldn't hide their true origins from them, as Frostmask's origins had been hidden from her. Was now the time they should tell them the truth?

Autumnleap inclined his head to her.

Up to you, his amber gaze said. *I'll follow your lead.*

Frostmask blinked and took a deep breath, steadying herself.

"You two have been outside before," she said, speaking before she could lose her nerve. "You were actually born out there."

Their two pairs of huge eyes turned to her, tiny brows furrowing in

confusion.

"But aren't kits born in the nursery?" Mistkit asked.

"Yes. In ShadowClan they usually are," Frostmask said, choosing her words carefully. "But, you two were born outside of ShadowClan territory. Autumnleap and I are your parents... but I didn't actually give birth to you. He and I found you in the woods. The queen who had given birth to you had... had gone to StarClan. So, Autumnleap and I took you in."

Both Newtkit and Mistkit blinked hard, confusion and fear darkening their features. Frostmask's heart twisted, the desire to shower them with reassurances building in her.

"But, just because you were born outside of ShadowClan, that doesn't mean that Frostmask and I aren't your parents," Autumnleap said before Frostmask could even open her jaws again. "We both love you so much."

Frostmask nodded hard in agreement, forcing a purr as she curled her body more tightly around their kits. The pair didn't try to shy away from her, but their small bodies remained stiff, stunned into silence and stillness. Her belly twisted.

Please say something.

"...So it's true? We don't have Clan-blood?" Newtkit finally rasped. "There's something wrong with us?"

Frostmask's muscles tensed.

"No," she said, her body vibrating with the force of the word.

"But we aren't ShadowClan," Mistkit muttered, despair flooding his expression.

Frostmask gave her ears a shake.

"That's not true. Do you think I'm not ShadowClan?" Frostmask said.

Both of her kits gasped, their eyes rounding.

"What? No! You're the deputy!" Newtkit exclaimed. "That's like *the most* ShadowClan!"

Mistkit nodded solemnly. "Besides Sedgestar."

"Besides Sedgestar," Newtkit amended.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Frostmask had to resist the impulse to twitch her whiskers in amusement at the kits' innocent perception of their world.

"That's right, I'm ShadowClan's deputy," Frostmask said. "But, I wasn't born in ShadowClan."

Frostmask blinked down at her kits, taking in their shocked, wide-eyed expressions as they tried to absorb this new piece of information.

"...Like us?" Newtkit finally asked.

"Yes," Frostmask murmured. "I was born out in the forest. My parents weren't ShadowClan cats, but ShadowClan took me in when I was a kit, about the same age that you are now."

Mistkit and Newtkit exchanged a glance as if they were still struggling to believe such a thing could be true. Frostmask rumbled a comforting purr, her heart warming with fondness as she gazed at her kits.

"Being in ShadowClan isn't about having Clan-blood," she mewed gently. "It's about having the hearts of true ShadowClan warriors." Frostmask bent her head, nuzzling their downy-soft sides. "You two belong here, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Mistkit started to purr in response, and after another moment, Newtkit echoed him. Frostmask shot a relieved glance at Autumnleap. She was sure that the kits would still need some time to come to terms with the news, but thankfully they seemed to be accepting it well enough, all things considered.

Frostmask's attention was pulled to the nursery's entrance as the bush rustled. Dewleaf's head poked inside, blinking her blue-green

eyes over at them.

"Sprucekit has something she'd like to say to Mistkit and Newtkit, if that's alright," Dewleaf said.

Mistkit's eyes widened in a look of faint worry, but he blinked in acceptance. However, Newtkit's little black and orange brow furrowed, and she buried her face back into Frostmask's pelt.

"I don't wanna see her," Newtkit's muffled voice said.

Autumnleap brushed his tail reassuringly down their daughter's side.

"Let's at least hear her out, okay?" he said.

Frostmask gave Dewleaf a nod, and she withdrew from the entrance, allowing Sprucekit to pad inside. The kit seemed nervous, her neck fur prickling slightly. She took a pace or two inside and stopped a few tail-lengths away from where Frostmask, Autumnleap and the kits curled up to shuffle her paws.

"I'm sorry, Newtkit and Mistkit," Sprucekit said, her gaze downcast towards the mossy nest. "I didn't mean it. I just wanted you to come out and play."

Newtkit's tail twitched sullenly, her face still turned away from the older kit. Mistkit at least looked at Sprucekit, but he also remained silent. Sprucekit anxiously kneaded her claws into the mossy nest, shooting Frostmask a wide-eyed, worried look, seemingly afraid that her fears of the two younger kits now hating her had come true.

As the silence stretched on for another few moments, Newtkit finally lifted her face from Frostmask's side and shot Sprucekit a fierce glance.

"Frostmask told us that we weren't born in ShadowClan," Newtkit sniffed. "But, Frostmask wasn't born in ShadowClan either, and she's great! She's the deputy!"

Mistkit nodded in agreement with his sister, and Sprucekit's ears

twisted back as she shot another guilty look at Frostmask.

"I know..." she muttered, her gaze turning back to the kits. "I'm sorry I said that. I... Do you two want to come play now? Me, Fogkit and Mudkit were gonna play Clan-attack. They are ThunderClan, and I was gonna be ShadowClan. But, you can be ShadowClan too, if you want."

Mistkit's ears pricked in interest. "Play outside?"

Sprucekit nodded. "There's not enough room in the nursery."

Newtkit shifted uneasily against Frostmask's flank, but Mistkit's tail flicked in excitement, clearly enticed by Sprucekit's peace offering.

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Autumnleap declared, already rising to his paws. "Why don't we go do that, Mistkit and Newtkit?"

Sprucekit's face brightened in relief, enthusiasm sparking in her eyes.

"I'll go tell Mudkit and Fogkit!" She whirled around, and dashed from the den.

Mistkit seemed just as excited at the prospect of the game. The normally mellow kit's pelt rippled with eagerness as he bounced around Autumnleap's paws.

"Are you gonna play on our team too, Dad?" Mistkit asked, blinking up at him.

Autumnleap's whiskers quivered in amusement. "I doubt it would be very fair if I did. I'm a full grown warrior!"

"But then we will always win!" Mistkit squeaked.

Autumnleap *mrrowed* loudly as he headed for the den's exit. "Good point! Excellent strategic thinking, Mistkit."

Newtkit was still pressed into Frostmask's side. Frostmask gently nosed her kit's face before she slid her off her flank and stood as well.

"You don't have to go out if you don't want to," Frostmask murmured to her. "But, Autumnleap and I will be right here with you and your brother if you do."

Newtkit gave an uncertain blink, but nodded, trailing after Frostmask as they headed for the nursery's exit. Autumnleap left first, Mistkit following him after only hesitating a heartbeat at the den's threshold. Frostmask poked her head into the thorny tunnel, but didn't fully exit the den yet as Newtkit lingered inside.

"I'm still scared," Newtkit confessed, her small ears folding against her head. "But I should be brave. ShadowClan warriors are brave."

"Being scared doesn't mean that you're not also brave," Frostmask murmured, turning her gaze back to her kit. "You are brave. You've been outside the nursery already. You've even been outside the camp! Not even the other kits have done that yet."

Newtkit blinked hard a few times, her head tilting to the side as she considered Frostmask's words. A fire suddenly sparked to life in her eyes, and her expression creased in determination. After only a heartbeat more of hesitation, she padded out of the den, Frostmask following close behind.

Frostmask's heart nearly burst with pride as her kits took their first steps into ShadowClan's camp, their blinking eyes wide and dancing around the clearing as they took in their first unobstructed view.

"It's so big," Mistkit breathed.

Autumnleap purred fondly.

"You'll be used to it in no time," he said, before he started flicking his tail in the direction of dens, already launching into explaining what they were. "That huge boulder is the Clanrock. Sedgestar calls meetings from on top of it, but the cave beneath is the medicine cat's den where Elmclaw sleeps and keeps all his herbs. Sedgestar's den is actually beneath the Oak Tree, you can just barely see the tunnel there in the roots..."

"They're out!" a voice cried, interrupting him.

In only a moment, Mudkit rushed over, followed by his littermates as Poolcloud's litter mobbed the younger kits.

"You can finally play our games with us!" Fogkit said, gleefully bouncing up and down on his toes.

"Sprucekit said that we got to be ShadowClan," Newtkit meowed quickly, shooting Sprucekit a sharp look as if uncertain if she'd keep her word, but the older kit just dipped her head in agreement.

As the gang of kits scampered off to play, even Lichenkit joining her siblings, Dewleaf shot Frostmask a pleased glance. Frostmask's purr grew louder, happiness swelling in her chest to see the kits all playing together despite their argument. Frostmask wished that Poolcloud and Pineshade could be here to witness it too, but the morning patrols were still out, so most ShadowClan warriors were absent from camp.

Frostmask settled in with Autumnleap to watch their kits, relieved to see the older litter being gentle with the younger kits, despite how they tackled their littermates with unbridled ferocity. Frostmask leaned against Autumnleap's fluffy side, contentment settling over her like a soft blanket of moss.

The morning stretched on as the kits played, and Frostmask shot a glance towards the sun. It was ticking higher into the sky, sending worry prickling through her pelt. She had to leave camp soon if she wanted to meet Larchtail and Mottledflame with Birdstrike at Fourtrees on time. Frostmask's stomach sank at the thought of having to leave in the middle of Newtkit's and Mistkit's first time out in camp, but who knew when the next chance she'd get to speak with Birdstrike? If she stood up Larchtail and Mottledflame, she may not get a next chance at all.

How else will I truly know what Paledusk is capable of? Finding out the truth about my parents is important, especially if Paledusk is involved in provoking the other Clans against ShadowClan. She reminded herself.

...But is this more important than your kits? Another thought whispered in response.

Frostmask gave her ears a sharp shake to dislodge the idea before she got the chance to dwell on it. If tensions between the Clans stayed this high, her kits would be at risk. Their safety had to come above her spending time with them, no matter how much it felt like thorns nettling her. Frostmask turned to Autumnleap, stretching up to put her muzzle closer to his ear.

"I have to go," Frostmask muttered.

His eyes widened in understanding.

"Hold on," he said. "I'll walk you out."

Frostmask nodded in acceptance as Autumnleap sprung to his paws and bounded over to Dewleaf.

"Hey," he meowed to her. "Do you mind watching the kits for a few heartbeats? Frostmask and I are just going to step out of camp for a moment."

"No problem," Dewleaf said with a flick of her tail.

Autumnleap nodded to Frostmask and started padding towards the thorn tunnel, Newtkit and Mistkit too distracted by play to even notice them leaving. Frostmask trailed just behind Autumnleap's bushy red tail as they slipped out of camp. Autumnleap walked for a little while longer until they were comfortably out of earshot of anyone in the camp before he finally turned back to her, his amber eyes round with concern.

"Are you *sure* you don't want me to come with you?" Autumnleap asked. "You are meeting with enemy warriors."

Frostmask nodded, even as her stomach clenched a bit in worry.

"I'm sure. I need to go alone," she said. "Mottledflame and Larchtail aren't expecting anyone but me. It might spook them if they saw I brought someone else, and I can't afford to miss speaking with Birdstrike. Everyday that passes without me figuring this out is a day closer to a disaster for us." Frostmask clenched her jaw to try to keep the anxiety at bay, but she couldn't entirely suppress the shudder that rippled through her pelt. "I can feel it coming."

"I could hide in the bushes and only come out if you need me," Autumnleap offered, his tail-tip moving in quick, worried tics.

Frostmask shook her head. "And, if they happen to notice you, they'll think it's some kind of ambush or spying, and things would be even worse than the first scenario."

Autumnleap heaved a loud sigh of defeat, his ears angling back. Frostmask stepped towards him, lightly brushing her muzzle against his cheek and breathing in his familiar, earthy scent.

"Besides, the kits need one of us here today," Frostmask murmured. "It's been a big day for them, especially with all the information we told them about their past, and mine. They will need you to answer their questions, and to comfort and reassure them."

Autumnleap pressed his cheek back to hers in return with slightly increased pressure.

"You could stay here to comfort them too," he murmured. "But, I won't say that you don't have to go. I know you do. Just please stay safe."

"I trust Larchtail and Mottledflame," Frostmask said as if reiterating it would make her completely believe it.

Autumnleap withdrew his head to blink at her solemnly.

"Still, be careful," he said.

"I always am," Frostmask said with a gentle blink back at him. "I'll be back soon."

"But, if you're not back by the time Dustleap starts complaining about the evening patrols being assigned late, I'm coming after you," Autumnleap said, his brow furrowing. "And, there's nothing you can say to stop me from doing that."

Frostmask purred, her chest warming with affection. "Of course. I will be eagerly awaiting your rescue."

"Good," Autumnleap said, starting to purr a bit too. He twitched his

ears towards the trees. "Now you should get going before I come to my senses about this frog-brained meeting, and enlist Poolcloud's help in trapping you in the camp with me and the kits."

With a final *mrrow* of amusement, Frostmask waved her tail in goodbye and headed into ShadowClan's forest.

Her first stop was a patch of chervil that she rolled in thoroughly to disguise her scent. Frostmask then set her paws in the direction of Fourtrees, but her journey there was slower than normal since she avoided ShadowClan's most frequently used trails. She didn't want to run into a curious clan-mate— or StarClan forbid, *Dampfang*— and risk them asking her where she was going.

The late greenleaf air around Frostmask was heavy with humidity, and tiny bugs buzzed incessantly around her ears as she trotted through the woods, but the insects faded as she left the marshier parts of the territory behind her. Before long, she'd reached the thunderpath. Frostmask slipped through the damp tunnel, back to taking the route through ThunderClan. Both WindClan and ThunderClan seemed more or less equal hostile to ShadowClan these days, and the ThunderClan route was faster. She'd just have to be careful.

Frostmask slowed when she stepped into the light pouring in from the end of the tunnel. Her whiskers twitching warily as she scented the air, Frostmask poked her muzzle out of the hole. When no strong scent of ThunderClan greeted her, Frostmask allowed the rest of her head to emerge beneath the dense bramble bush that sheltered the tunnel. She kept her ears flat against her head to disguise her silhouette as her eyes darted around the surrounding area, confirming what her nose and ears already told her— there was no ThunderClan warriors nearby.

Frostmask crawled out of the tunnel and squished herself flat to the ground to wiggle under the brambles, careful to not leave any snags of fur behind on the thorns. Her long fur added a bit of challenge, but Frostmask was lucky that her smaller size allowed her to weave through the tendrils fairly easily.

Once she was clear of the bush, Frostmask picked up the pace to a

brisk clip. She kept her ears pricked and her mouth open to taste the air as she jogged through the woods, dodging through ThunderClan's infuriatingly thick undergrowth. Her heart thumped with nervousness at the thought of a ThunderClan patrol appearing, but the forest was still, and soon enough, the ground beneath her paws began to slope downwards as she approached Fourtrees.

Frostmask brushed through a dense patch of ferns and the four mighty oaks appeared in the hollow below her, their soaring green-leaf canopies rustling in the slight breeze. Sunlight edged their leaves golden, and as Frostmask began down the slope, it instilled a sense of discontent in her. It felt wrong padding up to Fourtrees in the middle of the day. She was only ever used to seeing the four massive oaks and the Great Rock cast in shades of silver from the starlight and the moon. While Fourtrees was *technically* always neutral grounds, even outside of the full moon, unease about being noticed in the area still swirled in Frostmask's belly. Both ThunderClan and WindClan seemed to be looking for any sort of excuse to be more aggressive towards ShadowClan. Frostmask didn't want to give more reason for their anger by being spotted at Fourtrees.

To alleviate her paranoia, Frostmask didn't enter the clearing that surrounded the Great Rock, instead choosing to remain in the shelter of the ring of undergrowth. Hidden from prying gazes, she crouched down to wait. The sun was still inching higher in the sky, and Frostmask allowed her eyes to close for a few heartbeats, hoping the warmth of the light on her back could melt away her mounting nerves. If she had remained in ShadowClan today, with her friends, mate, and kits, where she belonged, she'd still be in camp right now, enjoying a nap, sharing tongues, or eating some fresh-kill as her Clan rested through the brightest, hottest part of the day. But, instead she was here in Fourtrees, in the middle of the day, waiting for SkyClan warriors to appear, when she had no idea if they would.

The sound of rustling leaves made Frostmask's eyes snap back open. Any fragile sense of calm she'd deluded herself into feeling vanished as instead her whole body knotted in tension. Her gaze darted across the clearing, searching for movement as her claws

unsheathed and dug into the ground.

Is it Larchtail and Mottledlfame? Or someone else? A WindClan patrol? A ThunderClan one?

An unfamiliar, rasping voice reached Frostmask's ears, but it was too muffled and mumbled for her to decipher any words. Another, clearer, voice responded to it, and Frostmask's ears jutted up as she recognized it.

"It's good for you to get out of camp every so often," Larchtail was meowing. "We will head back soon."

Relief washed over Frostmask like rain, and she had to bite her tongue to keep herself for letting out a sudden mew of joy.

They came!

"Isn't it nice to be at Fourtrees, Birdstrike?" that was Mottledflame's soft, lilting voice now. "It's been a while since you were last here, right?"

"What are you meowing on about?" Birdstrike grumbled. "I was just here last gathering! It was a doozy too."

Frostmask blinked. Birdstrike had not been at the last gathering—Frostmask would have certainly noticed if she was.

It must be another part of her confusion.

"I still can't believe Darkstar," Birdstrike continued, disdain filling her voice. "What a useless excuse for a leader. I hope he drops dead any day now and Raincloud takes over! She'd be so much better than him!"

Frostmask's brow furrowed.

Darkstar? Is she talking about the leader of SkyClan before Fennelstar?

Concern trickled through Frostmask. Fennelstar had been SkyClan's leader for seasons upon seasons now. Paledusk had told her that Darkstar had died and Fennelstar had become leader before he'd

even been born.

How much information will I be able to get out of Birdstrike if she's so confused? Will she think I'm May, like I hoped she would? Or will she not even remember ever knowing about May at all?

The undergrowth at the edge of the clearing rustled, and Larchtail and Mottledflame emerged, Birdstrike reluctantly trailing behind them. On the surface, the elder looked much the same as Frostmask had last saw her— thin, with some mats at the ends of her long grey and white fur as if she kept forgetting to groom, but with some strength left in her wiry muscles and broad shoulders. But, Birdstrike's eyes were cloudy as they roved around the Fourtrees clearing. Frostmask had seen her gaze like that before, when she'd gotten lost in her memories, but the cloudiness would usually clear after some moments. It didn't dispel this time.

Mottledflame's and Larchtail's eyes also flickered around the clearing, but Frostmask knew that they were looking for her. Frostmask parted her lips, drinking in the air to double-check for any additional scents beyond the three of them. She didn't notice anything, but the SkyClan cats were clearly wary too. Larchtail's tail tip flicked in constant, anxious motion, but Mottledflame laid their tail on hers to still it, giving Larchtail a soothing blink.

"Okay, we saw Fourtrees. Can we go back to camp now? My paws are tired," Birdstrike complained.

"In a moment..." Mottledflame murmured, their eyes still searching the clearing.

Frostmask knew she should emerge soon, but nervousness still gripped her. Even though it seemed like they came alone as promised, Frostmask still had to be careful with her approach. She couldn't risk spooking Birdstrike by suddenly appearing out of the undergrowth. Everything hinged on the elder being at least willing to speak with her.

Birdstrike had now taken a seat with an irritated huff. She began to wash the long fur between her toes, but she got distracted after a few licks, her gaze rocketing upwards as a sparrow dived over her

head with a shrill alarm call. Like a crack of lightning, Birdstrike leapt. Frostmask's jaw went slack at the height the elder managed, easily reaching the bird, her long claws flashing out and snagging into its feathers. The sparrow let out a desperate cry that was abruptly cut short as Birdstrike slammed it to the ground under her paws, snapping its spine.

"Birdstrike!" Larchtail said, almost jumping out of her fur at the elder's sudden leap. "What are you doing?! You could hurt yourself!"

"I thought you said your paws were tired," Mottledflame added in a much milder tone, their whiskers twitching in faint amusement.

"Our Clan needs to be fed doesn't it?!" Birdstrike said, taking a seat next to her catch and curling her bushy tail around her paws. "Just because you two have been lazy, useless lumps of fur this hunting patrol, doesn't mean that I need to be."

"But, this isn't a hunting patrol... Oh forget it," Larchtail sighed, her ears angling back.

"Don't worry Doepaw," Birdstrike said, blinking at Larchtail. "I'm sure your mentor will teach you how to hunt sparrows soon."

Larchtail sighed again. "Okay, Birdstrike."

Frostmask took that as her cue to begin her approach. Still sticking to the shadows of the undergrowth, she slunk around the clearing until she was about a tree-length away from the SkyClan cats. Not wanting to startle them by popping up too close, Frostmask stepped out of the ferns. Birdstrike and Mottledflame were looking in the other direction, but Larchtail's eyes darted to Frostmask right away. Frostmask dipped her head in greeting.

"Hi," she said in a soft voice. "I'm so glad you decided to come."

"Frostmask." Larchtail visibly relaxed as her gaze swept the undergrowth behind her and took in the fact that she was alone. "It's good to see you."

Mottledflame's muzzle also whipped towards her, a friendly purr building in their throat. Frostmask glanced towards Birdstrike.

Despite the impressively fast reflexes she'd shown with catching the bird, she hadn't turned towards the sound of Frostmask's voice.

Can she not hear me?

Frostmask swallowed hard as if bracing herself to leap into a pool of water.

Well, here goes nothing.

Frostmask lifted a paw and shot Larchtail a questioning glance. "May I approach?"

Larchtail's ears flicked nervously, and she shot a glance over her shoulder towards Birdstrike.

"Yes, but... she can be unpredictable," Larchtail warned.

Frostmask put on the most confident face she could muster.

"I can handle it," she said.

Frostmask kept a fairly wide berth as she circled around Larchtail and Mottledflame and approached the edge of Birdstrike's line of sight. The elder still didn't glance towards her.

"Birdstrike?" Frostmask attempted, raising her voice slightly.

Birdstrike blinked as if stirring from a dream. Her head turned slowly at first, but as she caught sight of Frostmask, her rheumy eyes stretched wide in shock. Then, as quick as a flash, she'd whirled around on her paws, her claws unsheathed and her tail already lashing.

"What are you doing here?!" Birdstrike hissed, arching her back.

Frostmask stopped her approach, but maintained a relaxed posture, careful to keep her ears pricked and tail lifted so her body language looked as pacifying as possible.

Is it working? Does Birdstrike think I'm May? Or does she just think I'm a random rogue or stranger?

"I just want to talk," Frostmask said.

Birdstrike snorted, baring yellowed fangs.

"I have nothing to say to the likes of you," she spat. "Clan-mates, chase off the trespasser!"

Birdstrike took a few stiff-legged steps towards Frostmask, her tail thrashing and her pelt puffing out around her. But, after a moment, Birdstrike stopped her approach and turned a puzzled glance back on Larchtail and Mottledflame as she realized they weren't following her.

"What's wrong? Doepelt? Why aren't you chasing her off!" Birdstrike rasped.

Larchtail dipped her head.

"I think we should hear her out, Birdstrike," she said in a low voice.

Birdstrike growled in response. Her narrowed eyes met Frostmask's, the reproach in her gaze clear, but she didn't try to attack again. Frostmask could feel Larchtail's and Mottledflame's gazes on her too, full of intent, silent curiosity. Frostmask took a deep breath. Larchtail and Mottledflame had done their part, bringing Birdstrike here. But, getting any useful piece of information from Birdstrike's confused mind would be entirely up to Frostmask.

"You look familiar," Frostmask began, putting herself in the paw-prints of her mother. "We've met before, haven't we? My name is May."

Birdstrike's only response was curling back her lip to bare yellowed fangs again.

"I'm looking for someone— a clan-mate of yours," Frostmask pressed on, trying not to let Birdstrike's reticence get to her. "Slatewhisker."

Birdstrike rumbled an ominous growl and took another stride closer to Frostmask. She was only a few tail-lengths away now, and her gaze seemed to burn into Frostmask's as she stretched herself up to her full-height, towering over her.

"You'll stay away from him and the rest of SkyClan, if you know what's good for you, *rogue,"* Birdstrike spat, digging long, unsheathed claws into the ground.

Frostmask found her mouth suddenly dry. Despite Birdstrike's confusion and age, it was difficult for Frostmask to not be at least a little intimidated by the elder's size, scarred pelt, and the fury smoldering in her expression. The formidable warrior Birdstrike had once been was all too obvious.

"Please, I don't want a fight," Frostmask said, lowering her eyes from hers in a calming gesture. "I'm just worried about him. I haven't seen him in some time."

Birdstrike's ears twitched, a look of confusion darkening her expression.

"What?" she snapped. "That can't be right. He was with you just when I chased you off our territory."

Frostmask's eyes widened, relief sparking across her pelt. She'd been right! Birdstrike had met May. Now she just had to dig in deeper to find out everything she knew about her and Paledusk.

At this news about Slatewhisker, Larchtail gasped, but Birdstrike didn't even flick an ear back in her direction. It was as if she'd entirely forgotten that her two clan-mates were behind her. The anger in Birdstrike's eyes was dimming. Instead, a renewed cloudiness replaced it as she got more and more lost in her own mind.

"Is this some kind of trick?!" Birdstrike demanded.

"No, it's not a trick," Frostmask said, trying to sooth her before she could get too confused.

Birdstrike's gaze seemed to refocus on Frostmask at least somewhat, and Frostmask's stomach churned with nerves. Unlike Birdstrike, Frostmask was much too aware of Mottledflame and Larchtail standing only a few tail-lengths behind her. Frostmask couldn't get the information she needed from Birdstrike without asking about

Paledusk, but Larchtail and Mottledflame had no idea about Frostmask's relation to their deputy. Implicating Paledusk could turn Larchtail and Mottledflame against her, or worse— it could send them right to the SkyClan deputy to confess everything that happened today.

Dread filled her at the thought.

But I have no other choice.

Frostmask clenched her jaw, steeling herself.

"When you saw me with Slatewhisker, Paledusk was there too, right?" she asked.

Birdstrike hissed, her cloudy pupils contracting to tiny, furious slits. A sudden paw lashed out and bright pain burst through the back of Frostmask's head. Frostmask gasped and stumbled back a few steps, her ears ringing as the salty tang of blood wreathed the air around her. Frostmask lifted one of her paws to her head and the white fur came back splattered with red.

She clawed me!

"How dare you speak of my son like that!" Birdstrike snarled. "Paledusk would never do such a thing! Stay away from him! Stay away from both of them! I won't let you take them! *I won't!"*

As Birdstrike spoke, her voice rose to a nearly hysterical screech. She dug her bloodied claws into the dirt, looking only a moment away from lunging at Frostmask again. Larchtail and Mottledflame stared wide-eyed as Frostmask crouched, her muscles tense as she readied herself to spring out of the elder's way.

"I'm... I'm not trying to take them!" Frostmask said, still slightly dazed from the hard blow to her head. "I'm just... I'm trying to figure out what's going on."

"Well, you can't fool me, rogue," Birdstrike snarled. "I— I... I know what's going on."

Birdstrike's eyes darted from side to side. Her brow furrowed as her

anger faded again, but her confusion was clearly mounting.

"But it does feel like a while since I've seen Slatewhisker," Birdstrike muttered, staring down at her paws as she seemed to speak no one in particular. "Where has he been? Is he at camp?"

The elder started to pace, her eyes fogging over. Larchtail blinked at her grandmother in concern. She took a few steps closer to her.

"...Birdstrike?" Larchtail meowed hesitantly.

The elder didn't respond, too lost again in her own mind.

Frostmask slowly lifted herself out of her defensive crouch, her belly heavy with disappointment as she stared at Birdstrike.

Birdstrike knew that Slatewhisker had known May— that much was obvious— but she so vehemently denied Paledusk doing the same... Even if she was somehow lying about it, Frostmask doubted there would be anyway she'd get Birdstrike to change her story at this point.

So Birdstrike can't tell me anything new about Paledusk and May, after all.

All Frostmask had really gotten from this conversation were new cuts on head, and all it'd done to Birdstrike was stress her out.

"But then why... No, it doesn't make any sense. Where is he?" Birdstrike was asking herself, blinking hard in confusion. "Where's my son?"

Pity grew in Frostmask as she watched the elder pace and mutter.

Maybe she shouldn't have suggested having this conversation at all. Frostmask had just confused and tormented Birdstrike by reminding her of a time when Slatewhisker had still be alive, but breaking the code by meeting with a rogue.

Frostmask sighed, her ears angling back.

Autumnleap was right. This was just a waste of everyone's time.

Frostmask exchanged a glance with Larchtail and Mottledflame, reading the discomfort in their expressions.

"I think that's enough," Larchtail said, padding forward to put herself between Frostmask and the elder. "We shouldn't put Birdstrike through anymore."

Frostmask dipped her head.

"I agree," she murmured. "I'm sorry. This didn't go the way I hoped. I didn't mean to upset her."

Larchtail just flicked an ear instead of responding. She turned to Birdstrike, causing the elder to jolt when she gently lay her tail over her back.

"Doepelt?" Birdstrike meowed, some of the fear and worry in her expression fading as she 'recognized' a familiar face.

"Let's go back to camp, Birdstrike," Larchtail said. "We've been out for a while, and you must be tired and hungry. I'm sure there's a nice, juicy squirrel on the freshkill pile there waiting for you. Do you want to carry back that sparrow you caught, or should I?"

Birdstrike blinked.

"But what about her?" she growled, whipping her head around to glower at Frostmask from over her shoulder.

Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise. She'd thought that Birdstrike would have forgotten that she was here by now.

"Er— Mottledflame will take care of chasing off the intruder," Larchtail said with a glance back at Frostmask. "You don't have to worry about her."

"Yes," Frostmask muttered. "Don't worry. I'm leaving."

She started to turn aside.

"Good riddance, flea-pelt!" Birdstrike snarled venomously, still glaring at her with enough hatred to set her pelt ablaze. "Go run

back to the twoleg-place and your little kittypet friend!"

Frostmask froze mid-turn, Birdstrike's final words ringing in her ears.

"...Kittypet friend?" she echoed, her heart-rate picking up. Her head slowly rotated to look back at Birdstrike. "What kittypet friend?"

"Don't play dumb!" Birdstrike snapped, her tail lashing impatiently. "I saw him too, with you! The pudgy black-and-white runt. Make sure you tell him to never come back here again either, or I'll line my nest with his pelt!"

Frostmask stared at Birdstrike, desperate hope swelling in her chest.

There's another cat! Someone else who knew May, Paledusk, and Slatewhisker! Is he still out there somewhere? He has to be!

Frostmask wanted to rush over to Birdstrike and thank her over and over again. But, she knew that the SkyClan elder would despise nothing more than that, so Frostmask swallowed back her purrs of relief and simply dipped her head.

"I will. I'll tell him. And, I promise, I'll never bother you again, Birdstrike," she said solemnly.

Birdstrike just grunted, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. But, Frostmask's attention had already shifted off of her and to Larchtail and Mottledflame. Frostmask felt a jab of relief at the intrigue sparking in the two SkyClan warrior's gazes as they met her eyes. As much as Larchtail had acted reluctant to set up this meeting, she and Mottledflame were clearly curious about Bridstrike's mention of the kittypet too.

As Birdstrike became distracted by the sparrow sitting in the dust near her paws, Frostmask slunk over to Mottledflame and Larchtail.

"Can you take me to the twoleg-place? *Please?"* Frostmask murmured to them.

Mottledflame's hazel eyes shone with interest, but they flicked their ears at Larchtail, deferring to her. Larchtail's gaze met Frostmask's

and held for only a heartbeat before she sighed in acquiescence. Now Frostmask couldn't silence her purr of relief. Against all odds, Birdstrike had given her a new lead.

A black-and-white kittypet. Now all I have to do is find him.

Familiarity in the Foreign

Frostmask's thoughts whirled with excitement, anticipation, and anxiety as she rose from her nest. She gently stepped over her sleeping kits and crept out of the nursery into a camp wreathed in shadows. It was darkest time of night— sunrise still a while off. It was also the quietest time in camp, when the evening patrols had long since returned, but before the dawn patrols needed to be organized. Most cats were sleeping peacefully in their dens. The only cats who would be awake at this time were those seeking a solitary night-hunt, or those like herself, with secretive motives.

Yesterday, Larchtail and Mottledflame had agreed to meet Frostmask at the boundary between SkyClan's territory and the twoleg-place at dawn. They couldn't be gone from their camp for too long, or else someone would notice they were missing, but they had offered to at least show Frostmask the area of the twoleg-place that SkyClan most frequently patrols— the most likely location for the black-and-white kittypet Birdstrike had mentioned to reside. Frostmask was uncertain how long it would take her to reach their meeting point, except that it would be a long trek from ShadowClan's camp. The least risky path would be for her to skirt the outside borders of ThunderClan territory until she hit SkyClan, but she had no concept the distance that would be. It very well may take her the rest of the night to get there.

So I better get going now.

Autumnleap's somber amber eyes blinked at her from the shadows of the thorn barrier as she padded over to the tunnel. Knowing that she'd have to leave and wanting to avoid any questions, she'd assigned him as the camp's guard for the night. That made for one less clan-mate questioning her whereabouts. But, it did mean that she had to fend off Autumnleap's concerns for a final time. He'd already made it abundantly clear what he thought of this 'frog-brained' plan.

"Is there anything I can say to change your mind?" Autumnleap

whispered, touching his nose to her ear as she reached his side. "Meeting with SkyClan warriors at Fourtrees is one thing, but heading all the way out to the twoleg-place with them?! I love you, Frostmask, but sometimes I worry you have tadpoles swimming in your head."

"I need to do this," Frostmask whispered. "It's the only other lead I've got. It doesn't matter that it's risky."

"Of course it matters!" Autumnleap whispered back, blinking hard. "You have to weigh the risks to the rewards. What if it doesn't even work out? What if you can't find the cat you're looking for?"

Frostmask stretched up on her toes to brush her cheek fur against his, both affection and annoyance towards his protectiveness swirling inside her.

"Then I come back home. We forget all this nonsense about my parents' past, and you can stop fretting about me like a mother goose," she said.

Despite her light and teasing tone, worry clenched in Frostmask's belly. Autumnleap was worried what might happen if she was caught by SkyClan today, or if something bad happened to her in the twoleg-place— hypotheticals. But, she and the rest of ShadowClan had plenty of problems that *weren't* hypothetical. If she failed to find this kittypet, or learn anything new about Paledusk, none of her problems would be solved. She'd be just as lost as before about the source of the conflict building against ShadowClan, and they would still be barreling on a collision course towards it. Things would end poorly— one way or another.

"I'll see you soon," Frostmask said. "Watch over the kits and keep the Clan from asking too many questions while I'm gone, okay?"

Autumnleap sighed.

"I'll try my best," he murmured. "But come back as quick as you can."

Frostmask nodded. She faced the tunnel, but a sudden impulse

came over her that made her turn back, pressing her muzzle to his.

"I love you."

Autumnleap gave a soft, melancholic purr. "I love you too."

Frostmask gave him a final, fond blink before slipping into the tunnel and exiting camp. She stepped into ShadowClan's dark pine forest, pointing her paws in the direction of the ThunderClan's border. She started forward at a brisk trot, one which she could maintain for some time; she had a lot of distance to cover tonight. But, she'd just made it away from the vicinity of ShadowClan's camp and entered into the denser woods when there was a soft rustling behind her.

"Whatcha doing?"

Frostmask almost jumped out of her fur at the sudden voice. She whipped around and the black, spiky-furred figure of Pineshade melted out of the darkness, the faint glimmer of starlight in her one amber eye the only clear visual indicator of her presence.

Frostmask exhaled sharply. "Great StarClan, Pineshade! You nearly scared the life out of me."

Pineshade blinked at her.

"You didn't answer my question," she said, her tail-tip flicking in impatience.

"I'm just... going for a night hunt," Frostmask said, some nervousness starting to twist in her belly at the intense glimmer in Pineshade's eye.

Pineshade padded closer to her, one of her brows arching.

"Really? How about I come with you then," she said smoothly. "I don't feel like sleeping."

Frostmask's ears angled back.

"Er..." she mumbled. "I'd prefer to hunt alone tonight..."

"It's funny," Pineshade said, her amber eye narrowing. "Autumnleap told me the same thing when I asked him what you were up to after I saw you leave camp. But, you and I both know my brother has always been a terrible liar."

Frostmask froze, her chest tightening as her nervousness grew into full-blown anxiety.

"Seriously, Frostmask," Pineshade said, locking her under the heat of her amber gaze. "What's going on?"

Frostmask hesitated, silence yawning between them as she weighed her options.

Pineshade was one of her best friends. Couldn't she simply just trust her with the truth, like she'd done with Autumnleap? She could tell her that she was investigating her father— SkyClan's deputy.

Intense worry stabbed through Frostmask.

But, what if that changed the way Pineshade saw her and destroyed their friendship? It'd been seasons since she used to ridicule Frostmask as a rogue, but if she found out she'd been keeping this secret about Paledusk... it may bring those old feelings back to the surface.

Frostmask's stomach twisted nauseatingly at the thought, but her mind quickly bounced to a new possibility.

Will I even be able to keep this a secret from Pineshade, or anyone else for that matter, for much longer? If I find out that Paledusk has been up to something— causing the other Clans to threaten ShadowClan— I'll have to explain how I came across the information, right?

Pineshade's tail twitched with more vigor. Patience was quickly draining out of her expression. Frostmask needed to make a decision.

"I'm sorry. I can't talk about it right now," she finally whispered. "But, please trust me when I say it's important, and that I need to do it alone."

Pineshade rolled her eye with an annoyed huff.

"I'm not the only cat starting to ask questions, you know," she said. "Dampfang came up to me yesterday around sunhigh, demanding to know if I knew where you were."

Frostmask's eyes stretched wide, every muscle in her body tense. She'd had no idea Dampfang had noticed her absence. He hadn't said a word to her after she'd returned from Fourtrees.

"He did? Then what happened? What did you say?" Frostmask asked, her chest tightening.

The last thing I need right now is Dampfang causing more trouble by finding out about my meeting with the SkyClan cats!

Pineshade waved away her concern with a swish of her tail. "I'm not an idiot! Of course I told him the same thing that I heard Autumnleap tell him— you were worried about WindClan and decided to do a patrol down the border alone just to check."

Frostmask relaxed slightly, silently thanking StarClan for Pineshade's quick wit.

Pineshade shook her head. "Speaking of idiots, though, did you come up with that frog-brained story about WindClan or did Autumnleap? Doing a border patrol alone is an even dumber excuse than night-hunting alone. At least the latter is believable, but only an idiot would patrol WindClan's border alone right now, when they're being so hostile to us."

Frostmask grimaced slightly.

I shouldn't have left yesterday without giving Autumnleap an excuse to give the Clan. I just didn't think anyone would notice or care! Sunhighs are a cat's own time— they can spend it in the camp, or out in the territory, whatever they see fit.

"It doesn't matter who came up with that," Frostmask said, shaking her head.

Pineshade snorted. *"Autumnleap."*

"I just can't have Dampfang on my tail about this," Frostmask continued, her tone insistent.

Pineshade's ears pricked, her expression growing more serious. She took another step towards Frostmask.

"Then you admit that was just an excuse yesterday? Why were you really out? Is it secret deputy stuff you and Sedgestar planned? Is something really important happening?" she asked.

Frostmask shook her head helplessly. "I don't know. I'm trying to figure that out."

Pineshade opened her mouth, another question clearly burning on her tongue.

"Pineshade, please," Frostmask said before she could speak. "I promise, I'll explain it to you soon, but I need to go now."

Pineshade's mouth closed slowly, her ears angling back and her lips twisting into a surly expression. For a moment, Frostmask feared that she would refuse to let her go unless she gave her some real answers, but then Pineshade sighed sharply.

"Fine," she grumbled. "But, you better keep that promise. Otherwise, I'll claw your whiskers off."

Frostmask nodded, nervousness still knotting in her belly at the thought of telling Pineshade the truth, but she shoved the sensation away. That was a problem for another night. She had other, more pressing matters to deal with right now.

"Can you help Autumnleap with keeping the Clan off my back?" Frostmask asked, her ears pricking hopefully. "I might be gone for a while. Not more than a day, but... long enough that more cats than Dampfang will start to ask questions if we're not careful."

"Wait, only Autumnleap knows to lie for you?!" Pineshade said, her eye stretching wide. "StarClan, you're in way more dire need of my help than I thought! Was he going to just tell the Clan you're still out for a night hunt when it's in the middle of the day?! Sedgestar will be sending out search parties!"

Frostmask's ears heated with embarrassment. "I don't know... I was just going to let Autumnleap come up with something. I know cats will ask questions, but I really need to do this. And, he told me that he would handle it."

Pineshade shook her head dramatically.

"I'll handle it," she insisted. "I'll tell the Clan that you asked me to organize the patrols for you. You'll be... sheltering in a den outside of camp because you're sick to your stomach from a bad mouse, constantly spewing your insides out."

Frostmask wrinkled her nose at the gross mental image. "Ew."

Pineshade gave a sage nod. "Exactly. You don't want to see anyone else in that state, and no cat will want to see you."

Pineshade's brow furrowed.

"Well, except Elmclaw to bring you medicine, and Redclaw to make sure you're okay. But, I'll figure something else out to tell them," she said.

Frostmask sighed softly.

"Thank you, Pineshade," she murmured. "Truly."

Pineshade flicked an ear to dismiss her gratitude.

"Whatever," she said with a shrug. "But, you do owe me big time, so you better tell me *everything* when you get back."

With that, Pineshade swished her tail in goodbye, turned around and stalked off. Frostmask waited a moment longer, her ears pricked and muzzle lifted to the breeze to make sure that she'd really gone before she disguised her scent in a nearby patch of fennel and resumed her trek. Anxiety buzzed in her head like a persistent mosquito as she made her way to the thunderpath before turning to follow it down the ThunderClan border, until she passed the place where she'd found Newtkit, Mistkit, their sibling, and their birth mother, and reached the edge of Clan territory.

Frostmask paused at the very edge of the thunderpath to check for monsters, but it was quiet this late at night. She inhaled a deep breath.

Here goes nothing.

Frostmask darted across the sticky black stone and into the forest that stretched beyond Clan borders. The area here looked largely like ThunderClan territory, but she could tell from the scents on the breeze that it wasn't prey-rich. However, the scents of twolegs were fairly strong in this area.

Maybe the proximity to the twoleg-place scares prey away. That's probably why ThunderClan doesn't mark this area. It's not worth maintaining.

Frostmask kept each of her senses strained as she continued, on high alert for any predators— dogs, foxes, badgers— that might lurk in this area without fear of being harassed by Clan cats. The fur down Frostmask's spine prickled at the eeriness that came with being outside of Clan territory. Things here seemed both so similar, but also so foreign.

Is this the same way May took me? The thought struck her out of nowhere like a lightning bolt from a blue sky. *Am I retracing our pawsteps from seasons ago? That long, terrible trek in the snow from the border of SkyClan into ShadowClan's pines?*

Despite the warm air, Frostmask shivered, glancing around at the trees with a new fear and awe as she pictured the green-leaf canopies instead ladened with ice and snow. Would she walk right by the hollow tree den that she'd been born in?

I never thought my paws would ever travel this way again.

The night wore on as Frostmask padded through the strip of woods that bordered ThunderClan's territory. With every step she took, she could almost feel the ghost of May walking beside her.

Tiredness was beginning to drag at Frostmask's paws, but she jolted out of her weary trudging as she realized the environment around

her was starting to turn from black to shades of grey. Her ears perked up as concern washed away her exhaustion.

It's already almost dawn?!

Frostmask's jaws parted to drink in the air. The forest around her looked the same as it had when she'd crossed the thunderpath, and the scent of ThunderClan remained heavy on her tongue. Was she even close to the SkyClan border yet?

I can't miss meeting with Larchtail and Mottledflame!

Frostmask leapt forward, forcing her tired legs into a lope. Thankfully, she didn't have to run for long before the powerful scent of SkyClan scent-markers washed over her.

Thank StarClan!

Even though ThunderClan's territory didn't extend into this part of the words, Frostmask quickly realized that SkyClan's did when ran into a line of their scent markers in front of her. She crept over the markers and traveled for just a few tree-lengths more before the forest ended abruptly. The area in front of her was an expanse of churned up dirt and stumps, and the scent of twolegs and monsters were heavy in the air.

This must be the Treecut-place Larchtail and Mottledflame told me about.

Frostmask glanced around, searching for their pelts; this was the place that she was supposed to meet them. To her right, the destroyed forest continued on for only a little bit before transforming back into normal, healthy woods, but to her left side, it stretched on until it hit a cropping of twoleg dens and monsters. Beyond them, there was nothing but more towering dens, their dark roofs stark against the pale dawn sky. Frostmask's pelt itched uncomfortably as she gazed towards the strange territory.

The twoleg-place.

Frostmask turned towards it and began down the edge of the Treecut-place, sticking to the shadows cast by the bordering trees.

Her ears pricked in eagerness as she caught the scent of Larchtail and Mottledflame, and she soon spotted two silhouettes perched on a large stump. Frostmask waved her tail to catch their attention and bounded forward.

"Sorry I'm a little late," she panted as she reached them. "It was a longer journey here than I'd thought."

Mottledflame sprung off the stump to meet her and dipped their head in greeting. But Larchtail just blinked down at Frostmask, a wary gleam in her eyes. Frostmask's chest tightened in worry as she met her gaze.

Is she having second thoughts?

"It's weird seeing you here, so deep in our territory," Larchtail muttered finally.

Mottledflame arched a brow.

"Well, we did allow her here," they pointed out.

Larchtail's flipped her striped tail in response, her brow furrowing, but she still rose to her paws. "Come on. The dawn patrol will have left camp at first light. Let's get to the twoleg-place before they make it here."

Larchtail leapt down and started trotting off, leaving Frostmask and Mottledflame to follow.

"Will they also patrol the twoleg-place?" Frostmask asked as she put on a short burst of speed to catch up with Larchtail.

Larchtail shook her head. "No. We don't patrol the twoleg-place regularly like we do our borders. Once we are beyond the woods, we shouldn't have to worry about running into any of my clan-mates."

They walked in silence for awhile, leaving Frostmask to fearfully marvel at the approaching twoleg dens. Closer, they were even larger and stranger than they appeared from far off. They weren't the tallest structures she'd ever seen— most were shorter than trees,

but they were quite wide, with unnaturally sharp and straight angles.

Mottledflame glanced over at her, quickly noticing her prickling pelt.

"Oh, have you ever seen a twoleg den before?" they asked.

Frostmask gave her head a small shake.

"There's a really little one by the Carrionplace," she murmured. "But nothing like this... there are *so* many."

"This isn't even a fraction it it," Larchtail murmured. "And, the twoleg-place just keeps going. I don't think there's been any Clan cat who's been able to find the end of it."

Frostmask glanced over her shoulder at the trees that had clearly been destroyed by something unnatural.

And, they're making it even bigger, aren't they? Frostmask thought, recalling the information she'd gleaned from the conversations she'd had with Paledusk. *The twolegs are the ones that did this to your forest, right?*

But, Frostmask had enough sense not to ask that out loud. She needed Larchtail and Mottledflame to keep helping her, and she wouldn't win any favors with them by asking probing questions about SkyClan's problems.

Larchtail's and Mottledflame's pawsteps were confident as they led Frostmask past massive, slumbering monsters from only fox-lengths away. Every hair on Frostmask's pelt strained against going so close to the enormous, foul-smelling beasts, but Larchtail and Mottledflame were going that way...

"Aren't you afraid that they'll wake up?!" Frostmask hissed as she hurried to catch up to the SkyClan warriors.

The pair exchanged an almost amused glance.

"Monsters only wake up if there are twolegs around," Mottledflame

explained. "And, the twolegs aren't here yet."

"...Oh."

The SkyClan warriors continued to look a bit amused at her discomfort and worry. Frostmask shook her pelt to flatten her bristling fur, feeling a bit like a foolish apprentice out on her first patrol.

"There are a few thunderpaths here that SkyClan knows well. They are the places we'd be most likely to patrol, when we go into the twoleg-place," Larchtail said as they continued. "Mottledflame and I don't have the time to escort you around them, but we will give you directions. The dens along those thunderpath are the best chance you have of finding this kittypet that knew you mother. After all, it makes the most sense that... that Slatewhisker would have met him here."

Frostmask nodded, but she didn't miss how Larchtail's voice hiccuped slightly over Slatewhisker's name. She was clearly still uncomfortable with the idea of her father having such close connections to cats outside of SkyClan, and a kittypet especially.

But she is still willing to help me. Frostmask felt a sudden flash of gratitude towards Larchtail— her kin, even if she didn't know it.

They entered into the shadows cast by the fences of the first row of twoleg dens, and Frostmask's pelt lifted again off her spine despite her best efforts of controlling it. But, even Larchtail and Mottledflame looked more wary now.

"Twolegs typically don't come out until a bit later in the morning," Larchtail murmured. "But it's always good to stay alert."

They turned the corner of a fence and reached the first thunderpath. No monsters prowled down it yet. Instead, they sat placidly in tiny thunderpaths next to the twoleg dens.

"Alright. This is where you will want to start," Mottledflame said, lifting this muzzle to point their nose down the thunderpath. "You'll want to head down this path until you reach a yellow den with a

huge maple tree in the yard. Then you will turn right, and travel until you see the den next to the strange pond. Don't drink the water in that pond, by the way; it tastes terrible and will make you sick if you have too much. Turn right there again and keep walking. It will take you back to the Treecut-place. You'll emerge somewhere down that way." Mottledflame vaguely waved their tail down towards the right. "From there, you will have to make your way back to your own territory."

"Be careful when you come back here to the Treecut-place. You don't want to run into any patrols," Larchtail warned.

Mottledflame nodded. "Yes."

They turned their hazel gaze onto Frostmask. "You'll want to look for the black-and-white kittypet in the dens that border that thunderpath boundary and the ones in-between them. Does that all make sense?"

Instead of answering, Frostmask stared wide eyed at the alien landscape before her— the many thunderpaths, the manicured yards with unnaturally short grass and strangely shaped bushes, and as soon as the sun grew higher in the sky, it would be crawling with twolegs and monsters. Unfamiliar scents washed over her wave after wave.

I really have to navigate this all by myself?

She was starting to regret not letting Autumnleap come with her.

"Frostmask?" Larchtail prompted.

Frostmask blinked, jerking herself out of her fear and summoning her strength.

"Okay," she said with a sharp exhale. "So, first right turn at the yellow den with the tree, and the next right at the weird pond, correct?"

"Yes," Larchtail said.

"Alright..." Frostmask turned from the twoleg-place to instead focus

a grateful gaze on Larchtail and Mottledflame. "Thank you for all of your help— truly."

Mottledflame dipped their head in a graceful acceptance, but Larchtail hesitated.

"If... if you find the kittypet, you'll let me know if he tells you anything about Slatewhisker, right?" she asked.

Frostmask nodded. She could tell that, in her own way, Larchtail needed answers about her parent just as desperately as Frostmask needed answers about hers. Neither of them could fully move on with their lives with these mysteries swirling in their pasts.

"I will," she said.

"Thank you," Larchtail breathed. "Well... good luck."

Larchtail and Mottledflame hung back as Frostmask ventured into the twoleg-place. Even though she had to work to keep her paw-steps steady, she didn't look back for reassurance from Larchtail and Mottledflame, if they were even still lingering at the Treecut-place's border. Frostmask knew she was on her own from here.

She kept her mouth parted to search for cat scents as she darted from yard to yard. But was difficult to pay much attention to searching for cats when so many other, stranger, things assaulted her senses. Morning sunlight was growing stronger, and with it, the twolegs were stirring as the SkyClan warriors had warned.

Odd yellow lights flickered on from inside dens. She caught glimpses of twolegs' massive figures through the holes in the sides of the walls. Dogs were barking from nearby, but she couldn't see them. Then she nearly jumped straight out of her fur when a monster roared to life further down the thunderpath. It's eyes glowed a harsh yellow as it crawled out of its little thunderpath and onto the main one. Frostmask ducked beneath a hedge, terrified that it may have spotted her, but it turned away from her and started traveling down the thunderpath in the opposite direction.

Frostmask heaved a sigh, but as she crawled out of hiding her relief

that she was unharmed was eclipsed by a growing sense of frustration and worry. How in StarClan's name was she supposed to find a single cat in all this terrifying chaos? She hadn't even yet made it all the way down this single thunderpath that Larchtail and Mottledflame had marked out for her, and there were likely *many* more thunderpaths for her to check. She'd probably have better luck trying to find a single, specific squirrel in all of ShadowClan territory, than finding this one kittypet here.

"You need some help? You're looking a bit lost, young'un."

Frostmask started at the sudden voice, her head jerking towards it. Perched in the sunlight on top of a fence was a plump, older tom. He was grey-and-white furred, with the center of his face split with white that trailed up from his nose. A collar hung around his neck.

He's a kittypet then.

The rest of the tom's muzzle was speckled with white fur from age, and he gazed down at Frostmask with kind eyes.

"You new in town? Wander a bit too far from your house?" the old cat asked. "Just ask, and I'll point you in the right direction. I know this neighborhood like the back of my paw."

Frostmask blinked hard a few times, her surprise beginning to fade. She didn't understand several of the words this old tom used, but he sounded friendly. Help from a local cat that knew the area might be exactly what she needed.

"I'm... I'm actually looking for someone," Frostmask said. "Or er—someone who knew someone. But, I don't know where he lives. He's a black-and-white cat who once knew some cats named May, Paledusk, and Slatewhisker."

The cat stiffened, all traces of friendliness in his expression wiped away. He narrowed his eyes at Frostmask, sinking unsheathed claws into the wooden fence beneath him.

"Those are wildcat names. Are you looking for a Clan cat?" he asked, a growl rumbling beneath his words.

Frostmask's eyes widened, more surprised than frightened by his sudden defensive display.

"You've heard of the Clans?" she asked.

"Have I heard of the Clans?" the cat echoed with an incredulous snort. "Of course I've heard of the Clans! SkyClan loves to roam the neighborhood like they own the streets as well as the forest. Bunch of bullies."

The cat gave a low growl, raking a gaze that was as sharp as thorns over Frostmask. "Don't tell me that you're one of them?"

"No," Frostmask said quickly. "Well— er— yes."

The cat's ears flattened against his head.

"I'm a Clan cat I mean," Frostmask continued, trying to explain. "But, I'm from ShadowClan, not SkyClan. SkyClan are our enemies too."

At that, the old tom relaxed slightly, sweeping a keen gaze up and down Frostmask.

"'ShadowClan,' huh? I can't say that I've ever met a ShadowClan wildcat before," he mused. "Now that you mention it though, I can see your scars. All ShadowClan cats look like you? I've only seen a fur pattern like yours on housecats and strays before. Didn't know ferals could look that way."

Frostmask's ears warmed slightly. Even here in the twoleg-place, where there were apparently other cats that looked like her, her fur pattern was still getting pointed out.

The irony wasn't lost on her:

A lot of Clan cats think I look too much like an outsider. But, I am too much of a Clan cat for these kittypets to accept me easily.

"No..." Frostmask admitted. "My mother wasn't from ShadowClan. She was from here actually." The tom's gaze sharpened with interest, and Frostmask uncomfortably shifted from paw to paw

under his scrutiny. "Her name was May, and she knew this black-and-white kittypet. That's why I'm here looking for him. May is dead now, so this cat is the only cat who I know of that might be able to tell me any information about her."

"Hm..." the old cat considered, impressing Frostmask with his balance when he reached a hindpaw up to scratch his ear as he remained perched top of the narrow fence. "Alright, I'll help you out. Just 'cause your mother is from the town, and it seems like she taught you some manners. You're the most polite wildcat I've ever met."

A sigh of relief slipped from Frostmask's mouth.

"Thank you," she said, deciding it would probably be best to not tell the cat that her mother had died long before she had the chance to impart any proper manners on to Frostmask.

The old cat sprung down from the fence, nimble despite his age, and landed a tail-length away from Frostmask.

"My name is Bingo," he said. "And you are?"

"Frostm— Frost. Just Frost," Frostmask said, cutting herself off just in time before she could give her full name.

Her pelt prickled.

What if Bingo mentions meeting me to some other cats, and it gets back to SkyClan or Paledusk? 'Frost' at least gives me some plausible deniability, but I doubt there are many 'Frostmask's running around twoleg-place.

Bingo's gaze narrowed skeptically.

"Just Frost, huh? That doesn't sound like any wildcat name that I've heard," he said.

"It's the name my mother gave me," Frostmask said truthfully.

Bingo gazed at Frostmask for a moment longer before shrugging dismissively, seemingly deciding that it wasn't worth an argument.

"Alright then, Frost," Bingo said briskly. "Now, I have to admit that I don't know where this cat that you're looking for is. But, I can take you to someone that might. There is a cat who lives nearby. His name is Leo, and he's *ancient."*

Frostmask's gaze widened slightly.

"And, I know that you're thinking that I look as old as dirt, so how can this other cat be ancient?" Bingo continued without a beat, making Frostmask's ears start to warm. "But, Leo has been around in this town forever— far longer than me. He knows everyone around her. If anyone knows about this cat you're looking for, it'll be him. And, he's had dealings with the wildcats in the past too."

Bingo took off down the thunderpath without anymore preamble, his tail held high. After a moment of hesitation, Frostmask trotted after him. She had no reason yet to distrust the friendly tom, and she'd already decided it would be near useless for her to search the twoleg-place alone. Still though, Frostmask hoped they would stay in the more familiar area the SkyClan warriors had marked for her. Thankfully, although they passed a few dens, it didn't take long for Bingo to veer off into a garden and head straight towards a fence.

"He lives over here," Bingo said before projecting his voice. "Hey Leo!"

Bingo leapt to the top of the short, stone fence without breaking stride, springing into another yard. Frostmask hurried to keep up with him, following him into a small, cool, and shaded garden, framed by bushes and ferns. Frostmask relaxed marginally. This area at least reminded her more of the forest than the yards in the other dens had.

"Leo? Leo! I want to talk to you about something!" Bingo yowled, pacing in front of the back part of the twoleg den.

Frostmask's pelt prickled as she slunk up behind him.

"Aren't you worried about catching the twoleg's attentions?" she hissed.

Bingo shot her a puzzled look. "Why would I be worried? That's kind of the point."

Muffled, but loud footfalls thumped from inside the den. Then a large flap in the side of it creaked open, sending a rush of strange scents into the yard. A towering figure emerged from the den.

Utter terror seized Frostmask in an icy grip. She darted for cover beneath a nearby bush, every instinct screaming at her to hide. Even though logically she knew that Bingo was a kittypet, who was used to twolegs, it still stunned her that he didn't even shrink away from the huge creature. The twoleg bent towards Bingo, who indulgently allowed it to stroke his back with a hairless paw. As the twoleg pawed at Bingo, a fluffy auburn tom shuffled out of the den behind the twoleg, padding into the yard. After a final stroke from the twoleg, Bingo turned away from it, striding over instead to the cat, Leo, presumably. The twoleg murmured something in an incomprehensible language before it turned as well and entered back into the den.

"You can come out now." Bingo was staring right at Frostmask's hiding spot, sitting next to the dark ginger cat.

Frostmask's pelt was still bristling, but now it was partly in shame as she crept out of the bush. The kittypets were so nonchalant about being around such massive creatures, her fear was almost embarrassing.

The kittypet they'd came here for, Leo, had clearly once been a large cat. But his frame now had been shrunk and hunched by age, like he was slowly collapsing within himself. His long, auburn fur was still magnificent though; it encircled his neck like a mane and gleamed in the sunlight. Frostmask found the color oddly familiar—it reminded her a lot of Autumnleap's fur.

As Frostmask approached the pair of toms, Leo swung his muzzle towards her, his mouth parting slightly to drink in her scent.

"So Leo, this is Frost," Bingo introduced her. "She came from ShadowClan, and she's looking for someone from around here who might have known some other Clan cats. I thought if anyone would

be able to help with finding them, it'd be you."

"ShadowClan?" Leo echoed, his eyes widening. "Now that's a Clan I haven't heard of in a long time."

"I'm not looking for cats who knew ShadowClan cats," Frostmask explained quickly. "SkyClan actually."

Leo blinked at her, but Frostmask noticed his eyes didn't exactly focus on her face. His pupils were stretched far too large for the sunny morning, leaving behind only a thin circle of green around them.

"What's a ShadowClan cat want with cats who had business with SkyClan?" he asked, his head tilting curiously. "ShadowClan territory is far from here. What... a half day's walk at least?"

Unease rippled through Frostmask's pelt. So far the kittypets all seemed to know a whole lot more about the Clans than she'd expected.

Their knowledge of SkyClan isn't too surprising I guess, but ShadowClan? Leo talks like he's been there!

"Frost isn't really a ShadowClan cat," Bingo explained. "Her mother lived here in town and knew this housecat she's looking for."

"I *am* a ShadowClan cat," Frostmask said tersely. "My mother is from here. But I've lived in ShadowClan nearly my whole life."

Leo blinked his unfocused eyes at her again, and his ears angled towards her with increased interest. "So you know ShadowClan well then."

Frostmask nodded, but when Leo showed no sign of acknowledgement, she spoke. "Yes, of course."

"Have you met a cat named Roseflight?" Leo asked.

Frostmask's brow furrowed. While that certainly was a Clan cat's name, it wasn't one she'd ever heard before.

"No. There's no one named Roseflight who lives in ShadowClan," she said.

Leo sagged, his already shrunken frame somehow looking even more hunched in on itself.

"Oh. I shouldn't've... Well it's been so long now..." Leo mumbled to himself under his breath before his voice trailed off to nothing.

His eyes stared out blankly, although Frostmask was starting to suspect that the elderly tom was unable to see anything at all.

"...Do you know a Roseflight of ShadowClan?" she prodded.

"I did once. A lifetime ago," Leo said softly.

He fell silent again, his expression forlorn and tired. Bingo just seemed confused, glancing from Leo to Frostmask a bit accusatively as if wondering what she'd done to his friend. Frostmask wasn't sure herself. She suspected that she'd stumbled upon some sort of buried history outside the one she was looking for, but she hardly had the time to investigate it now. She did, however, tuck the name 'Roseflight' into the back of her mind.

"The cat I'm looking for is a black-and-white kittypet," Frostmask continued, getting back on track. "And, he would have met with cats named May, Paledusk, and Slatewhisker."

"Yes, I know those cats," Leo responded swiftly despite his solemn expression. "I never knew a Paledusk, but some seasons ago, Slatewhisker, May, and Pepper would pass by here often."

A jolt of excitement fizzled through Frostmask, and she eagerly leaned towards Leo.

"Pepper? Is that his name? Is he a black-and-white kittypet? Er—" Frostmask's gaze flickered over Leo's unseeing eyes. "I mean, if you saw him. If you were able to..."

A brief look of amusement cracked through the melancholy on Leo's face.

"My eyes still worked a bit back then," Leo said. "Yes. Pepper was a black-and-white cat. A little fella too. But, I haven't seen him for moons."

Frostmask's heart sank.

"Is he still alive?" she asked.

Leo's tail flicked thoughtfully.

"I don't see any reason why he wouldn't be. He was young when I knew him, or at least a lot younger than me." Leo snorted. "Although when you get to be my age, all cats start looking like kittens."

"Then why haven't you seen him recently?" Frostmask pressed.

Leo shrugged. "That I can't say. He lives deeper into the town, so it's not easy for me to check. It may be that his housefolk just decided to keep him inside. Or, maybe they all moved. If my health was better, I might have gone out to his house at some point. But right around when Pepper and his friends stopped coming around, my eyesight got much worse until I couldn't see anything at all. I don't leave this garden anymore."

"It's important that I find Pepper, if he's still around," Frostmask said, her claws flexing impatiently into the ground. "Is there any chance you can tell me where he lives?"

"Well I certainly can't take you there myself," Leo said. "I'm too old for that, and besides, my poor housefolk would be worried sick if I disappeared from here. Bingo, though—" Leo inclined his head toward him, "—may be just the cat for that."

Bingo's eyes had gone half-lidded as he'd started to doze in the sunshine as Leo and Frostmask's conversation had gone on, but his eyes snapped open as Leo said his name.

"What? You're volunteering me?" Bingo asked indignantly.

"You're the one that brought her to me," Leo pointed out, his voice mild.

"But I didn't think I'd be guiding her all across town," Bingo protested.

"Not all across town," Leo said. "Just to a house close to the park. The white one flanked by oak trees. That's where Pepper used to live."

"The park is still quite a walk," Bingo grumbled. "And, I wanted to nap."

"Please?" Frostmask asked, widening her eyes at him pleadingly.

Bingo glanced at her and sighed, the grumpy front he'd put on fading quickly.

"Okay, fine. Let's get going then." Bingo rosed to his paws. "Good to see you, Leo."

"You too," Leo purred. "Come back at dinnertime, and we can share the chicken my housefolk's been cooking for me lately."

Bingo swiped his tongue around his jaws, suddenly in a much better mood. "I'll be here!"

Leo directed his gaze in Frostmask's direction.

"And, nice to meet you Frost," he added.

Frostmask dipped her head to him before remembering that he couldn't see it.

"It was nice to meet you too," she meowed. "Thank you for helping me."

She followed Bingo back over the short stone wall, and scrambled after him as he began trotting down the side of the thunderpath, his tail held high.

As the morning wore on, Bingo led her down thunderpaths, across yards, and through narrow gaps between twoleg dens. Although Frostmask tried to mentally mark landmarks, the twisting, twining path they took left her head spinning. They'd long ago left the paths

pointed out to her by Larchtail and Mottledflame.

Frostmask felt a stab of gratitude that she had Bingo guiding her. Without him, there would have been no way she'd have made it out to Pepper's den. As soon as she'd left the few thunderpaths defined by Larchtail and Mottledflame, she'd have been truly and utterly lost in the maze of the twoleg-place.

Bingo wiggled through a narrow gap in a wooden fence, and waited on the other side for Frostmask to squeeze through behind him.

"Nearly there," Bingo promised. "The park is just at the end of this street."

They took off down the edge of the thunderpath at a trot. Frostmask followed right at Bingo's tail, but she flinched at the sound of loud footsteps coming from the other side of the thunderpath. She turned to see that a twoleg had emerged from one of the dens and was stomping around his yard. But, his gaze met Frostmask's and he froze, staring over at the two cats for a moment before making a cooing noise with his mouth and stretching one of his massive paws in their direction. Despite the fact that he was on the other side of the thunderpath, Frostmask shied away from him, her fur prickling as every hair on her pelt yowled to run. But, Bingo didn't even spare the twoleg a second glance.

"Ignore him," he said, continuing on as if the twoleg was nothing by a nagging fly buzzing around his ears.

Frostmask swallowed hard and tore her gaze away from the twoleg, hurrying after Bingo.

How can he be so calm while being so close to such a massive creature?!

Thankfully, Bingo's instincts seemed to be correct, because the twoleg didn't try to pursue them, although Frostmask kept casting worried glances over her shoulder to be sure.

The twoleg disappeared behind them as they rounded a corner, and Bingo pointed his muzzle at a large den at the end of the thunderpath that was flanked with two towering oak trees, just like

Leo had promised.

"There it is. That's Pepper's house," Bingo said, coming to a stop. "But, this is where I leave you, Frost. If I stay away from my house for much longer, my housefolk will start wondering where I am."

"Thank you for bringing me here. You've been a huge help," Frostmask said.

Bingo looked faintly embarrassed. "It's nothing. I hope you find what you're looking for." He started to turn away, but paused. "You think you can make it back from here alone?"

Frostmask nodded. The twoleg-place's environment might be a confusing mess, but she knew she could at least still rely on her own tracking abilities.

"I'll follow our scent trail back," she said.

"Alright then," Bingo said, turning to leave. "Nice meeting you, Frost."

"You too. Goodbye," Frostmask said, waving her tail in farewell.

As Bingo rounded the corner again, heading back the way they came, Frostmask turned towards Pepper's house, a flash of nervousness appearing in her chest. She trotted down the thunderpath, feeling much more wary for twolegs and monsters now that she no longer had confident Bingo at her side, guiding her. But, she made it to the end of the thunderpath and the front of the large twoleg den without any of them appearing.

The yard in front of the den was devoid of any sheltering ferns or tall fronds, like how most of the twoleg yards were. Short, uniform, bright green grass pricked at Frostmask's paw-pads as she stepped onto it, creeping towards the side of the den. Thankfully, the yard wasn't completely bare. Bushes and flower beds ringed the den, providing places for Frostmask to hide if need be. Frostmask opened her mouth to scent the air, hoping that Pepper was nearby. Beneath the reek of monsters and twolegs, and the powerful, cloyingly-sweet scent of flowers, she did indeed pick up the scent of cat. It wafted

over to her from behind the den.

Frostmask began to circle the structure warily, her ears pricked and her gaze sharp as she scanned the yard. There was still no sign of Pepper, despite the growing cat scent.

Frostmask's every muscle was tense and alert for the appearance of twolegs, and when a nearby bush suddenly rustled, she nearly jumped right out of her skin. Frostmask turned towards the noise, scanning the shadows uncertainly. The bush was much too small for a twoleg to be hiding in, but there was definitely *something* in there.

"Hello? Pepper?" she tried.

The bush rustled again. A cat-shaped shadow emerged from beneath it and stretched up to his full height. The first thing that struck Frostmask about his appearance were the scars. His long white and grey tabby pelt was criss-crossed with them. Both of his ears were in tatters, and there was nothing but a crater in his face where one of his eyes should be. Fur had grown in the crater, and the scarring around the wound was clearly older than the similar one that Pineshade had. But even with all the time it'd had to heal, in someways, it still looked much worse than Pineshade's missing eye —whatever injury that caused it must have been especially gruesome. But, the cat's remaining eye was a clear, intelligent green, and it looked over Frostmask shrewdly.

Despite the cat's outward appearance, he was well-fed and sleek-furred, with a colorful blue and yellow patterned collar peeking out from the thick ruff of fur around his neck.

So he's a kittypet after all, no matter his scarred pelt.

"You're on private land," the tom rumbled. "I suggest you move along."

Frostmask took a step back, her ears flattening against her head. She didn't know that kittypets could be territorial like Clan cats were. Both Leo and Bingo hadn't seemed to care at all about her showing up in or near their dens.

"I'm sorry," she meowed, her eyes flashing as she looked at the intimidating cat. "I didn't mean to trespass. I'm just looking to speak with someone... You're not Pepper, are you?"

It didn't hurt to ask, but this cat wasn't black-and-white, and he also hardly matched the 'little fella' description that Leo provided.

The tom seemed to share her sentiment since he snorted, his amusement taking the edge off his alarming features.

"No," he said. "The name's Salt."

"I'm Frost," she said, dipping her head politely to him. "Do you know Pepper? Does he live here?"

The kittypet's eyes narrowed, and his mouth parted as he caught her scent on the breeze.

"Who's asking? You don't look like you're from the area," Salt said, a faint growl entering his voice.

Frostmask's pelt itched, wanting to bristle, but she forced it to stay flat. So far, Salt had been a lot less welcoming than the other kittypets she'd spoken to. It set her on edge, but she didn't want to appear aggressive. Otherwise, he might not tell her anything at all.

"I'm not," Frostmask meowed, giving another nod. "I'm from the forest. My home is a place called ShadowClan."

"I see," Salt said, but his brow furrowed, making Frostmask wonder if the word 'ShadowClan' even made any sense to him.

Bingo and Leo knew about the five Clans, but do all these kittypets?

"What's a cat from ShadowClan doing here?" Salt asked.

"I'm looking for answers about some cats Pepper used to know," Frostmask said, her tail-tip twitching anxiously. "Their names were Slatewhisker and—"

Salt jerked like he'd been struck.

"Slatewhisker?" he echoed, his ears pricking.

Excitement ran through Frostmask at the flash of recognition in his voice.

"You know him?" she asked.

Salt blinked once, his one eye glazed. "I used to..."

He dipped his head to flatten a clump of fur on his shoulder with a few brisk licks, a faraway look in his expression.

"Can you tell me about him?" Frostmask asked, unable to keep the eagerness from creeping into her voice.

Maybe Pepper did die or move away, but if this cat knows something, then this whole journey may still be worth it!

Salt slowly lifted his gaze from the ground and up to Frostmask. He shook his head.

"No. You're on a wild goose chase, Frost," he said, his voice turning hard. "There's nothing to tell. Slatewhisker is dead. Has been for seasons."

The finality in Salt's voice hit Frostmask like a heavy weight, her shoulders slumping under it. The tingle of excitement that had been running through her veins only moments ago was already fading to disappointment.

I know Slatewhisker's been dead for seasons, but some cat must know something about what happened back then with my parents, right?

"What about Pepper? Is he around? Can I ask him?" she attempted, but the questions sounded weak, even to her own ears.

Salt didn't respond. He just stared at her, his blank, impassive expression giving nothing away. The longer his silence stretched on, Frostmask's despair only grew.

Does he even know Pepper? Maybe he really is gone, just like May and Slatewhisker, and I'll never find out what happened back then...

Frostmask swallowed hard as she tried to wrangle her emotions back under control before they spiraled completely. But, Salt was right. This whole trek out into the twoleg-place had been a stupid idea— a wild goose chase. She belonged in ShadowClan, with her mate and her kits and her duties as deputy... What was she doing out here, searching for ghosts?

Frog-brain!

Frostmask shook her head to clear her mind.

"Thanks for helping me," she murmured to Salt. "I'll leave your territory now. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

Frostmask turned aside, but Salt's voice stopped her.

"Why?" he asked. "Why do you want to know?"

Frostmask's ears twisted back. She didn't want to answer him. She just wanted to slink off, go home to her family and forget about this whole thing. But, she felt like she couldn't be so rude to the cat that had helped her out, even if it wasn't in the way she hoped. The least she could do was humor his curiosity.

"Not that it matters..." Frostmask muttered from over her shoulder. "If Pepper is gone, I won't learn anything now. But, I thought he could give me some answers about my family. You see, my mother, May, was Pepper's friend, and Slatewhisker and I were kin. He's the brother of my father."

Out of the corner of her gaze, she noticed Salt stiffen. Frostmask's stomach tightened, and she slowly turned back to him, her pelt prickling with intuition.

"You knew them too?" she asked, although it wasn't really a question.

Salt gave a timid nod.

"I did." His voice was rough with tension.

"It's very important that I get information about them," Frostmask

spoke quickly, afraid that if she hesitated, Salt might pull away again. "I need to know about my past. It's a lot to explain, but it's not just important to me but also to my Clan. I think my father may be lying to me, and if he is, it could put a lot of cats in danger..."

Salt was completely still for several long moments, as if he was a cat craved from stone. Then he nodded, his one green eye deadly serious.

"I think I might still be able to help you," he said. "Follow me. Let me go get Pepper."

Salt got to his paws and walked swiftly down the edge of the twoleg den, heading towards the back. After a stunned moment, Frostmask rushed to follow him, her head spinning.

"Wait, Pepper's been here this whole time?!" she asked, almost indignant that Salt had led her to believe that he was gone.

Salt didn't blink, entirely unapologetic. "He's inside," was all he said.

Frostmask's ears perked. Just a few moments ago all her hopes about getting any answers had been dashed, but now anticipation thrummed through her again.

She might just find out some of the truth today after all.

Salt turned the corner, and Frostmask followed him quickly, her fur lifting slightly as they stepped into the deep shadow of the twoleg den. Salt padded up close to the den's wall, and Frostmask spotted a small flap in it, just large enough for a cat to fit through. Judging by the strong cat scent on it, it was a passage frequently taken by Salt, and presumably also Pepper. Salt glanced back at Frostmask, noticing the anxiety in her bristling fur.

"Don't worry. You don't have to come in," he reassured. "Wait here in the yard. I'll be right back with Pepper."

Frostmask nodded and turned to creep beneath a nearby holly bush, out of sight just in case some twolegs decided to show up. Salt pushed his way through the flap, his broad shoulders just barely fitting through as he entered the den. Frostmask fidgeted, uneasy

hiding so close to the twoleg structure, but she didn't have to wait long. Salt was already pushing his way back out again, and this time, a smaller, plump tom followed him.

Pepper was much gentler looking than Salt— more like how Frostmask imagined a kittypet to be. While Salt was all spikes and angles with his long, bushy fur and sharp scars, Pepper was soft and round. He had short white fur with a smattering of black splotches down his back and on his face. His head was round, as were his eyes, which were a soft yellow color.

Salt and Pepper met Frostmask beneath the bush, and Pepper's eyes widened as soon as he saw her face.

"Oh," Pepper gasped, his eyes searching hers as his mouth gaped open. "Oh... You really are... You're May's kit."

Frostmask's heart clenched. Of course she knew she looked like May. She'd known that since she was a kit. But when most cats saw at her for the first time, they didn't see her mother; what they saw was simply *foreign.* Paledusk had been the only other one who'd seen Frostmask as May. But, even he hadn't reacted to her like Pepper. Paledusk had looked at her like he'd seen a ghost; Pepper was staring at her like a long-lost friend.

"I was told you knew her," Frostmask rasped.

Pepper nodded emphatically, his yellow eyes welling with emotion. "She was my best friend for seasons! I could never forget... Your fur and eyes, they're the same as hers."

Frostmask ducked her head, suddenly bashful under the gaze of the cat who'd known her mother so well. Although it must be just as strange to him as it was to her— to see this other cat show up in his yard, wearing the face of his old friend.

When Frostmask didn't speak and offer up more information about May, Pepper's ears began to flatten as he came to the obvious conclusion of why she remained so quiet.

"Is she..." Pepper said, his voice wavering. "She isn't...?"

Frostmask fixed her gaze on her ground.

"I'm sorry to break this to you," she murmured. "She's dead. She died seasons ago, when I was only one moon old."

Pepper let out a long, slow breath. Frostmask forced her gaze back up to him. He and Salt exchanged mournful looks, and Salt wrapped his fluffy tail around Pepper while Pepper leaned into the much bigger cat's side. Pepper's eyes had darkened with grief, but he didn't seem all that surprised by the news.

"It'd been so long since I last saw her..." he murmured. "I always hoped some nice housefolk had adopted her, and that's why she went away. But, I feared..."

He closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep, trembling inhale.

"Thank you for telling me," he murmured. "Although I'm sorry that I never got to properly say goodbye."

Frostmask nodded, a lump of emotion suddenly in her throat. A strange feeling was settling over her. She was sensitive to the grief Pepper felt for May— StarClan knew she felt it too. But, although she grieved for her mother, this was also a rare instance were she struggled to miss her. It was the same as her walk from ShadowClan territory, like May was with her right now. Pepper had been her best friend. He'd *truly* known May, in a way Frostmask did not and could never hope to.

"Can you tell me what happened to her?" Pepper asked, pulling her out of her thoughts. "I'm a little confused. You're May's daughter. But Salt told me that your name is 'Frost,' although you're from ShadowClan? How did May's kit end up in ShadowClan, but without a warrior's name?"

"I am a ShadowClan warrior. My real name is Frostmask," she freely admitted.

There was no point in continuing to omit her true name to them. Pepper had given her no reason for her to be suspicious of him, but more than that, this entire mission would be pointless if she

couldn't trust Pepper. If Frostmask couldn't even entrust him with her name, how could she trust that he was telling the truth about her parents?

"I was born outside of Clan territory in the woods two leaf-bares ago. May couldn't find enough food for us, and my littermates died. My father, Paledusk, lives in SkyClan, but she didn't bring me to him for..." Frostmask shifted uneasily. "Well I'm not sure why she didn't. It's also possible Paledusk turned me and my mother away. I'm still trying to figure all that out. Anyway though, whatever happened with him, when I was around a moon old, May decided to take me to shelter in ShadowClan so that I'd survive. We made it there, but she didn't live for much longer. May named me Frost. That's the name I told Salt so that... other cats wouldn't know that I was here, if they came around asking for me."

"You don't need to worry about that. We don't talk much to strangers," Salt rumbled.

Frostmask blinked in understanding.

"Is that why you tried to send me away when you first saw me?" she asked.

Salt dipped his head slightly in concession.

"You do look like her," he murmured. "But, I didn't know for sure. And, I don't like to take risks."

"Can you tell me what you know about her?" Frostmask whispered, her gaze darting from Salt to Pepper. "And, about Paledusk and Slatewhisker?"

Salt slowly brought his eye back up. He and Pepper exchanged another long look. As if drawing strength from Pepper's gaze, Salt set his jaw and nodded firmly. Pepper gave a smaller nod in response and glanced back over at Frostmask, his yellow eyes hardening into something cold and sharp.

Frostmask blinked in surprise.

Even though she would bet that this small, gentle tom had never

raised his claws against anyone in his life, the look in his eyes was identical to that of a warrior who was readying himself to charge into battle.

Pepper lifted his chin.

"We will tell you *everything*."

Everything left forgotten

Slatewhisker slipped through the undergrowth, his eyes bright and his tail twitching eagerly.

"Just up this way," he meowed over his shoulder as he approached the edge of the forest and the outcropping of twoleg dens.

A large white cat rounded a bush behind him, his nose scrunched up.

"Why'd you drag me all the way out here again?" he meowed, giving his long-furred tail a shake. "I'm getting gross twoleg scent on my pelt."

Slatewhisker rolled his eyes.

"Oh lighten up, Paledusk. You used to be more fun," Slatewhisker said, lolling his tongue out at his brother.

Paledusk scowled at him, his expression only hardening in the face of Slatewhisker's teasing.

"There's no time for fun when you have a Clan to take care of," Paledusk rumbled. "You'd know that if you hadn't been spending all of your time as a warrior gallivanting around the twoleg-place, doing StarClan knows what."

Paledusk's words stung, but Slatewhisker did his best to not let that show on his expression. Paledusk had a nasty habit of twisting his claws in deeper once he realized that they made contact.

"Okay, okay. This'll only take a moment, and we'll go right back to hunting afterwards, alright?" Slatewhisker said, waving off Paledusk's worries with a swish of his tail. "But, I think you'll like them. They're really interesting cats."

"What I don't understand is why you're even *talking* to these cats in the first place," Paledusk sniffed, but he continued to walk after Slatewhisker anyway. "It's weird, and making our clan-mates gossip about you, *and* it's against the code."

Slatewhisker rolled his eyes, huffing in exasperation.

Why is Paledusk such a stick-in-the-mud sometimes?

"Our clan-mates won't care as long as it doesn't affect SkyClan," Slatewhisker said. "And, it doesn't— it's harmless! The code doesn't forbid having friends outside of the Clan, right? Besides, they're kittypets and loners. It's not like I'm meeting with other Clan cats and selling out SkyClan secrets or anything."

Paledusk arched a brow at him skeptically.

"Really? So these cats are *just* your 'friends?'" he asked.

Slatewhisker felt his skin start to warm, but he brushed it off with a quickly shake of his pelt.

"Yeah, they're *just* friends," he said in a firm voice, looking over his shoulder at Paledusk. "I'm not mates with any of them, if that's what you're implying."

"All I'm saying is that you've been spending a lot of time with these 'friends.' You can't fault me for asking," Paledusk said with a shrug. "Because taking a mate outside of the Clan *is* against the code, you know."

Slatewhisker nodded, and he knew he should've just left it at that... But, he couldn't stop the argument from forming on his tongue anyway.

"If I *did* have a loner or kittypet mate though... would it really be so bad?" Slatewhisker posited. "Since they'd live in the twoleg-place,

it's not like I'd have to worry about facing them, or any kits we had together, in battle. It really doesn't seem like it'd be a problem."

Paledusk glowered at him, half in anger and half in shock.

"But, you'd waste time caring for them when you should be taking care of SkyClan," Paledusk growled.

"Not if their twolegs take care of them instead," Slatewhisker pointed out. "Then I could just visit them every so often. No burden on the clan there."

Paledusk stared at him with wide eyes.

"You can't seriously be considering this?!" he rumbled in outrage.

Slatewhisker flicked his tail against his brother's flank in a calming gesture.

"Oh, don't get your tail in such a twist!" Slatewhisker meowed. "It's just a little thought experiment. That's all."

"It better be," Paledusk said with another low growl.

Slatewhisker lifted his nose to the air as he picked up the familiar scents.

"We're here. Come on!" he said, bounding ahead of Paledusk.

Slatewhisker ducked underneath a crumbling fence, emerging in a yard next to a large, abandoned twoleg structure. It was much bigger than the standard dens, and unusually decorated as well. Although most of the windows had been long ago shattered, colorful glass still remained in some corners, glinting in the sunlight. The top of the structure came to a steep sharp point, much taller than the nearby dens.

Slatewhisker had once climbed to the very top, where he'd been able to gaze out over all of the forest, seeing all the way to the moors in the west, and in the east, the sprawling two-leg place and even a hazy outline of the mysterious territory behind it. When he'd slept that night, back in SkyClan's camp, he had dreamt that he was

a bird, free to fly where he pleased, and he'd leapt from the den's top to soar all the way over the twoleg-place and into the distant lands beyond.

The lot surrounding the structure had slowly been reclaimed by the surrounding forests, and it was filled with tall weeds and grasses, as well as a few sapling trees and bushes. Besides the tall, interesting structure, Slatewhisker also liked it for that reason. It put him at ease to be in a place that felt more like the forest than the odd, manicured twoleg yards. It also helped that hardly any twolegs ever came here.

Slatewhisker led Paledusk through the yard and towards one of the shattered windows. It had been barricaded with boards of wood, but there was plenty of space for a cat to fit through.

In one easy, well-practiced motion, Slatewhisker sprung up on the sill. He glanced down at Paledusk from over his shoulder.

"Make sure you don't step on any of the glass. It's sharper than a claw and will cut your paw right open," he warned before turning and slipping into the den.

Slatewhisker jumped down into the large room, sneezing as he stirred up a patch of dust. As he waited for Paledusk to follow him in, he took a moment to admire the space. Sunlight streamed in through the gaps in the wooden boards, lighting up the dust motes that danced in the air. But, Slatewhisker's absolute favorite thing about the place was when the light hit the colorful glass that remained in the windows, sending dazzling colors kaleidoscoping across the ground.

Slatewhisker padded through a puddle of the rainbow light now, purring as it lit his fur up in an array of brilliant colors he'd only seen before on flowers in new-leaf and the jeweled backs of beetles. Then the wooden ground under his feet shook slightly as Paledusk's bulk landed behind him. Slatewhisker glanced over at his brother, his purr building louder in his throat.

"Pretty cool, right?" he asked.

Paledusk just grunted, seemingly unwilling to give his brother the satisfaction of an agreement. But, Slatewhisker didn't miss how he gazed around with wide eyes, taking in the huge room and colors. Slatewhisker began to trot forward, walking between rows of old twoleg benches.

"Guys? You here?" Slatewhisker called.

He could smell his friends, but there was no sight of them yet. As he approached the other end of the room, their scent grew stronger, until suddenly, a weight slammed into his back.

Slatewhisker released a yowl of surprise, which turned into a grunt as he hit the ground. Bowled over by the pounce, Slatewhisker and his attacker tumbled for a moment, and he was about to dig unsheathed claws into their pelt when a familiar scent flooded his mouth.

Slatewhisker went limp, allowing himself to be pinned down by the cat, and a pair of laughing blue eyes peered down at him.

"Are you bird-brained, May?!" Slatewhisker said with a mock growl, batting at the she-cat's face with soft paws. "If I hadn't realized it was you, I could've really hurt you!"

"I told her that it was a bad idea!" another voice peeped up.

Slatewhisker looked upwards and caught a glance of the black-flecked face of Pepper, peering down at him from what must have been May's same hiding spot, up on one of the low balconies that ringed the room.

May purred loudly, stepping off of Slatewhisker.

"I couldn't help it, you just made it too easy for me to sneak up on you! I thought you ferals were always supposed to be on your guard? Constant vigilance or something like that?" May's tail flicked in mischief.

Slatewhisker suddenly sprung to his paws and started prowling in a circle around May like he was hunting her.

"Sure, but we don't expect attacks from our *friends,"* Slatewhisker said with a huff. "We call that '*treason.'"*

Pepper's collar tinkled softly as he began to pick his way down from the balcony, taking a much more careful path than May must have when she'd leapt on him.

"I'm not a traitor," May protested, blinking on offense. "Think of it more like training."

She crouched down in an admittedly good approximation of his hunters' crouch, sweeping a critical eye up and down his body.

"It's like we're practicing fighting! You guys *do* do that, right? I basically used that tree-jumping technique you told me about," she said, stalking towards him.

Slatewhisker snorted, straightening.

"If you wanted a real fight, you should have jumped on him instead," Slatewhisker said, jerking his chin towards Paledusk.

So far, his brother had just been standing a few fox-lengths away in silence, his pelt bristling. When May had pounced on him, Slatewhisker had noticed Paledusk lunge towards them out of the corner of his eye, but Slatewhisker had recognized May before Paledusk could reach them and pry her off. Now his brother just seemed uncertain and uneasy.

Slatewhisker summoned him over with a few swishes of his tail. Paledusk slowly approached, his steps reluctant. He shot a burning glance at Slatewhisker.

Slatewhisker knew his brother well enough to be able to plainly read the thoughts in his face. Right now he was thinking something like: '*You brought me here just to roll around like kits with a bunch of kittypets? And, you told them about our secret attack strategies from the trees?!'*

"Paledusk is one of the best fighters in the Clan," Slatewhisker boasted, hoping some flattery would cheer his brother up. "He'd show you how a *real* SkyClan cat fights, right Pale?"

Slatewhisker nudged Paledusk's side with his muzzle.

"...Sure," Paledusk grumbled, his ears flattening.

"So, you're Paledusk," Pepper said, blinking in a friendly greeting. "I'm Pepper. It's nice to meet you. We've heard a lot about you from Slatewhisker."

"Just good things," Slatewhisker added jokingly.

Paledusk chose to glower instead of respond.

Slatewhisker gave Paledusk's shoulder another bump, but this time, his brother remained stiff and silent.

Oh he'll lighten up soon enough. Once he gets his head out of the mud and remembers how to have fun!

Slatewhisker chose to ignore his brother and turned his attention to his friends. Despite Paledusk's less-than-warm welcome, Pepper was still gazing at Slatewhisker with bright eyes.

"It's good to see you," Slatewhisker murmured, touching his nose to his in greeting.

"You as well," Pepper purred. "I hope you've been alright out in the wild with those new rogues roaming around."

"You know that they have nothing on SkyClan," Slatewhisker said with a small scoff.

"Right because a warrior like you could take on five rogues," Pepper teased.

Slatewhisker started to purr now too. "That's right. And, I could do it singled-pawed too."

"But, seriously, the rogues haven't been causing too much trouble for you, right?" Pepper asked, turning solemn again for a moment. "You're safe?"

Slatewhisker flicked his ears as if casting off his worry like he

would stray droplets of water.

"The new rogues are a nuisance at worst. They might chase a mouse across the border every so often. Honestly, they cause about as much trouble for us as WindClan, and unlike WindClan, we actually have to share a border with the rogues!" Slatewhisker shrugged. "Fennelstar wants to chase them off, but I think a stern talking to would probably work just as well."

Pepper's shoulders loosened as some tension in his muscles drained.

"Good. I'm glad they aren't a problem," Pepper said. "Hopefully things can resolve without fighting."

"But, if it does, I can handle them," Slatewhisker reiterated, puffing his chest out.

"Single-pawed," Pepper added with a purr, his eyes crinkling.

Slatewhisker's purr grew louder, and he relaxed under Pepper's gentle yellow gaze as if he were lying in a pool of sunshine. Slatewhisker felt a sudden rush of fondness for his friend, so much so, it took him a bit by surprise.

But, why wouldn't he appreciate Pepper? He was easily the kindest, most optimistic cat Slatewhisker had ever met. He'd probably be able to even put a grumpy Paledusk at ease— even when he was in his worst moods.

But, Paledusk seemed totally uninterested in both Pepper or Slatewhisker. Instead, his gaze kept drifting to May. Frankly, Slatewhisker didn't blame him. May was exceptionally beautiful. Her fur was soft and plush, swirling around her like a cloud, and she had the most brilliant blue eyes Slatewhisker had ever seen. Even her pelt pattern was interesting, unlike anything Slatewhisker had seen on any other cat before. Cats commonly had white paws or white splotches on their faces, but May was all creamy-white besides her face, paws, and tail, which were a gentle grey.

And, luckily for Paledusk, May seemed just as curious about him as he was to her. She swept her gaze up and down Slatewhisker's

brother, studying him closely.

"I think with enough training and practice, I could take him," May declared suddenly.

That finally broke through Paledusk's icy composure. He blinked once in shock, his green eyes flickering to May again, but this time, they lingered rather than quickly darting away. His gaze narrowed as he scrutinized her closely, taking in the striking grey markings, her dazzlingly sky-blue eyes, and her soft-furred body that spoke of a life far away from any battlefield.

"What?" Paledusk asked.

"I could take you," May reiterated, giving a decisive nod.

Paledusk huffed incredulously, tossing his head.

"I don't think so. Even if you practiced for days and days like a warrior, if you jumped on me like you did Slatewhisker, I'd tear you to shreds," he said, a slight growl entering his voice. "It wouldn't even take a heartbeat."

May bristled in offense. "That's not true. I think I'd be able to fight well if I trained hard."

"It *is* true," Paledusk insisted, his eyes narrowing to slits. "And, not as well as me."

May began to growl softly.

"Prove it," she demanded.

Paledusk blinked, his brow furrowing.

"You want me to prove it... like by fighting you?" he asked, baffled. "...Right now?"

"You seem so eager for it, so sure," May said, her tail twitching. "If I last even more than one heartbeat against you, I'd be right and you'd be wrong, correct? So, I'd win?"

Paledusk growled again, his tail starting to twitch.

"I'm not so eager to kill a friend of my brother," he snapped. "I'm just saying that it's a *fact* that if we were to fight, *I* would win."

"You ferals love to solve everything with your claws," May scoffed, rolling her eyes. "As if there's nothing more important than that."

Paledusk's lips curled back in a mocking, derisive snarl. "You speak as someone who hasn't ever had to lift a paw to provide for herself in her life."

May's fur puffed up, her blue eyes blazing.

"You know *nothing* about my life," she spat.

Slatewhisker's pelt started to prickle uneasily, and he and Pepper exchanged a worried look. This argument was quickly spiraling out of control.

Slatewhisker gingerly stepped between his bother and May.

"Why don't we all take a deep breath—" he started, but Paledusk cut him off by simply growling louder.

He brushed around Slatewhisker as if he didn't even see him there, striding closer to May while his long white fur bristled around him like dense fog.

"I *know* that you haven't faced real adversity," Paledusk hissed, bringing him and May nose to nose.

Slatewhisker had to give her credit for not flinching back. He wasn't even sure if he'd be able to hold his position if Paledusk had been in his face like that. His brother could be quite intimidating when he was angry.

"Because if you had, you'd understand that fighting *is* important when you have to do it to survive," Paledusk continued in a furious rumble, clenching his jaw.

May lifted her chin, his blue eyes defiant as she stared unblinkingly

into Paledusk's green ones.

"See, this is exactly what I'm talking about." May gave an exasperated scoff, reaching a paw out to poke at Paledusk's fluffy chest in indication of his proximity.

Paledusk's brow furrowed at May's oddly bold reaction. Slatewhisker could almost see his brother's confused thoughts in his gaze, churning like disturbed water as he tried to understand why May wasn't behaving the way he'd expected.

May also seemed to realize that she'd gotten Paledusk on his back foot. Her eyes suddenly glinted with impish delight, and, although Slatewhisker couldn't predict what May would do next, he knew his friend well enough to know that May wouldn't leave an opportunity like this wasted— now that she'd unsteadied him, she would go in for the kill.

May's body language relaxed, her chin lowering slightly as she gazed up at Paledusk through half-lidded eyes.

"You huff and puff to get in my face, but if you wanted to be this close to me, all you had to do was ask," she said in a low purr, a wave of wicked mischievousness sweeping over her expression. "Violence isn't the only way to influence someone."

Paledusk blinked in confusion, but May didn't give him the chance to respond. Rather than shying back from the furious, bristling Paledusk, as any reasonable cat would do, May stepped forward, purring and running her head under his chin. Paledusk froze, his growl abruptly cutting off and every hair on his pelt standing on end as she twined around him, brushing her fur against his and purring all the while.

Slatewhisker relaxed as the danger of a true fight passed. Now the only danger seemed to be of Paledusk's brain malfunctioning as he tried to process what just happened.

Slatewhisker and Pepper exchanged an amused glance, and Slatewhisker did his best to swallow back the purrs that suddenly bubbled up in the back of his throat. It was especially funny

because Paledusk was not a cat who got flustered.

It's almost refreshing to see him so caught off guard for once!

Paledusk remained rooted to the spot as May finished her circuit around him, stepping back and nonchalantly beginning to groom flat the parts of her pelt that had become ruffled from her play-fighting with Slatewhisker.

A few more heartbeats passed, and Paledusk still didn't move a whisker.

Slatewhisker's whiskers started to quiver now from the effort of keeping his purrs of laughter at bay.

Oh StarClan, I think she broke him!

Paledusk finally blinked, his gaze still locked on May. Slowly his bristling fur began to lie flat.

"W-who are you again?" he asked.

"May," she said simply, glancing up at him from her grooming.

"May," Paledusk echoed slowly as if tasting the name on his tongue.

Then Paledusk dipped his head to her, his expression softening. Slatewhisker watched with fascination as the transformation overcame his brother. It always amazed him how Paledusk was able to do that— go from deadly serious, or stewing with anger one moment, but the next, he was the most collected and charming cat in the forest. Paledusk was still ignoring Pepper, but Slatewhisker supposed he should count himself lucky that his brother had so quickly warmed up to at least one of his friends.

"It seems I underestimated you, May," Paledusk murmured. "My apologies. You are much more formidable than I'd thought. I can assure you, I won't make that same mistake twice."

May's whiskers twitched in amusement. "I should certainly hope so!"

Paledusk lifted his intent green eyes back up to her, and May gave

her shoulder fur a few brisk, additional licks. Slatewhisker couldn't tell if her pelt was still ruffled from the wrestling, or if her fur was suddenly prickling bashfully under the full force of Paledusk's charm.

"Anyway, I'm sorry too, for getting snappy. How about we start over?" May drew herself up as if noticing his presence for the first time and dipped her head politely. "It's nice to meet you, Paledusk."

Paledusk started to purr, inclining his head graciously in response.

"Oh no, please; the pleasure is all mine."

"There's something I need to tell you."

Slatewhisker's solemn words hung in the night air as an early leaf-fall breeze stirred the leaves below and behind them. They were just starting to change color, but Slatewhisker's focus was turned away from the forest. From his favorite perch on the steep roof of the abandoned twoleg-den, Slatewhisker could see the entire skyline of the twoleg-place stretching out before him. They tempted him with their dazzling yellow lights, the call to wander and explore even stronger than usual. Slatewhisker kept his eyes on the horizon, and he more so sensed than saw Pepper's gaze turn to him.

"Oh? What is it?" Pepper asked.

Slatewhisker took a deep inhale of the cool air to steady himself before he met his gaze. Beautiful, silver moonlight shone in Pepper's eyes, threatening to steal Slatewhisker's attention along with his breath, but he forced the words out before he lost his nerve or became distracted.

"Doepelt asked me to father her kits."

Whatever Pepper had been expecting him to say, it certainly was not that. Pepper's eyes widened in shock, and his ears angled backwards in a flash of dismay before he grappled back some control of his expression. He attempted to school it into something more neutral, but Pepper always wore his feelings on his face. Slatewhisker would have found the sorry attempt at an impassive

look hilarious if the conversation had been about anything less serious.

"You— Um— What?" Pepper asked, somehow managing to still sound polite despite it all.

"Doepelt is a clan-mate, and a friend," Slatewhisker said, his pelt prickling uncomfortably as he tried to explain.

"A friend?" Pepper echoed.

Slatewhisker nodded emphatically. "Just a friend! I don't feel anything else towards her, and she doesn't feel anything else towards me either. Or, anyone for that matter, I think. She just wants to have a family." Slatewhisker searched Pepper's gaze, studying him to see if he believed him. "It's not a typical arrangement I know. But, if she wants kits but no mate, can anyone really blame her? It is a lot to think about, though, so I told her to give me some time. I think I'm okay with it, but I wanted to talk to you about it before I told her anything."

"I— Well, Slatewhisker," Pepper said awkwardly, breaking eye contact to stare down at his paws. "You don't have to talk to me about it. Why should I have a say in who you have kits with?"

Slatewhisker's stomach twisted with nerves and his mouth opened, but for a few moments no sound came out of it.

"Because... well, because I want you to," he rasped, his voice soft but raw. "I... I care about you a lot—"

Pepper cut him off with a sudden look, and despite the gentleness of him, there was a spark of ferocity in his eyes.

"You care about May a lot too, but I bet you didn't sit up here with her and have this same conversation, right?" Pepper challenged. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Slatewhisker gazed at him in silence for a moment, his breath stuck in his throat. Slatewhisker's clan-mates always sneered at kittypets for their soft and weak natures, but they didn't know anything. Pepper was so brave, far braver than Slatewhisker could ever hope

to be. He was willing to take risks— to push, even when it was frightening.

"No. I haven't talked to her about it, and there isn't any reason for me to." The response flowed easily from Slatewhisker now, Pepper's words spurning him on. "I love you, Pepper. I want to be your mate — no one else's. And, I don't want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

Pepper softened again then, his gentle yellow eyes welling in emotion. He pressed his face into the thick ruff of fur around Slatewhisker's neck, a sudden purr rumbling through him.

"Oh you stupid furball," he said, every word full of affection. "I love you too, but I wish you hadn't started this conversation by telling me that you were thinking about having kits with someone else!"

Slatewhisker began to purr now too, his nerves fading and his heart lightening with every beat.

"But then I told you that I don't have any feelings for her!" he protested.

"Hush, I'm only teasing," Pepper said, with a sharp whisk of his tail. "Now let me just enjoy the moment."

Slatewhisker leaned his cheek against the top of Pepper's head, breathing in his scent— one which had become so familiar and comforting, despite being so different from his own or his clan-mates'.

For once, the ever-present, fluttering restlessness in Slatewhisker's chest settled and fell quiet. The sparkling edge of the horizon held much less intrigue now that Slatewhisker had everything he wanted, right at his side.

"If you insist," Slatewhisker murmured, letting his eyes drift shut.

Slatewhisker crept through the quickly darkening trees, all of his senses on alert to see if he was being followed. He made it to the SkyClan border unchallenged, and there he picked up his pace, striding through the thin strip of undergrowth that separated the

edge of SkyClan's territory and the twoleg-place. A few moments later, he was approaching the abandoned twoleg den and ducking under the fence there. When he emerged into the yard, he lifted his tail up in greeting, but his excitement began to dim some when he noticed there was only one cat silhouette there, waiting for him.

"Pepper couldn't make it tonight," May said, trotting up to him. "His housefolk kept him inside again."

Slatewhisker let out a soft hiss of frustration before taking a seat next to his friend beneath the sharp, triangular shadow of the towering den.

"How many nights are they going to keep him locked in there?" he growled. "It's been so many days since I've last seen him!"

"I think the twolegs are worried about the rogues," May said. "They've been really strict with keeping him in since the attack."

Slatewhisker nodded grimly. The rogues that roamed the twoleg-place's streets had grown from a minor nuisance into a full-blown problem— for SkyClan and the local kittypets alike. When they had first started sniffing around SkyClan's territory a few moons ago, Fennelstar had believed that it would be simple enough to drive off. SkyClan got into several scraps with the rogues at the border, but Fennelstar's aggression had the opposite effect he'd hoped for. Instead of scaring the rogues off, they'd chosen to organize. They had established patrols now and started attacking any small SkyClan groups that dared enter the twoleg-place. There had even been casualties.

Fennelstar was furious at the loss of his warriors and the twoleg-place hunting grounds, but Slatewhisker struggled to empathize with his leader when so much of this disaster seemed to stem from his own paws. If Fennelstar had just treated the rogues like any other cat and tried to reason with them instead of jumping straight to attacking, SkyClan might not be in this situation right now.

Although it wasn't only SkyClan who was suffering; the kittypets and loners that lived in the twoleg-place weren't safe now either. They were harassed or attacked by the rogues whenever they dared

roam around the neighborhood.

About a moon ago, Pepper had been one of the victims. He'd been on his way to the abandoned twoleg den to meet Slatewhisker when he had been pounced on by a group of them. Pepper had been injured, and ever since then, his twolegs tried their hardest to keep him confined to their den.

Slatewhisker gave a low growl.

He knew from what Pepper had told him that his housefolk cared about him, and so they must just be trying to protect him by keeping him inside. But, it didn't stop Slatewhisker's heart from feeling like it was constricted with brambles as more and more days passed with no sign of him.

"I should've been there when he was attacked," Slatewhisker growled, flexing his claws into the mossy ground. "If I hadn't been running late, then I would've heard it happening from here, and I would've been able to stop it before he got hurt. It's my fault that he stuck in the den now."

May brushed her tail down his flank.

"Stop it," she chided. "This isn't your fault. It's those bullies!"

Slatewhisker twitched his tail irritably. Whether it was his fault or not, it still meant that he couldn't see Pepper.

If only Fennelstar hadn't provoked the rogues!

"How did he seem?" Slatewhisker asked, glancing over at May.

Unlike him, with his duties to his clan always keeping him busy, May could roam the twoleg-place freely. She was able to visit Pepper at his den whenever she wanted.

Jealousy flared in his chest at the thought, but Slatewhisker did his best to stifle it.

Stop it. It's not May's fault that I'm stuck in SkyClan all the time.

"His wounds have all healed nicely," May said. "It doesn't even look like he was ever hurt now! Although we do have to talk through the window, so it's a bit hard for me to hear him sometimes."

May gave her tail an annoyed lash. "Then if we meow too loudly, his twolegs come out and chase me off! I think they might think I'm one of the cats that attacked him! Can you believe that?!"

"But, how *is* he?" Slatewhisker pressed, ignoring May's complaints. "Is he happy?"

Slatewhisker blinked, sudden dismay filling him.

How can he be, never being able to go outside?

May hesitated before giving a small shrug.

"He appears well to me," she said. "His spirits seem high enough, all things considered."

Slatewhisker's ears drooped as his belly sharply dropped. In some horrible, selfish way, the thought of Pepper being content hurt more than the thought of him being dejected.

Is Pepper truly happy, stuck in that den in the time? Never being able to feel fresh air on his whiskers? Properly speak to May? Or... or see ***me?***

May pressed her flank to Slatewhisker's, pulling him out of his thoughts. He glanced over at her to see her peering up at him in concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Slatewhisker's heart twisted.

The memory of Pepper's round, shining yellow eyes were the only thing he could picture in his mind right now. What he wouldn't give to see them again, and watch them light up as they noticed him.

"I— I—"

Slatewhisker looked away from May, the words shriveling up and

dying in his throat.

"It's nothing. I just miss him, is all," he muttered down at the ground, glaring at his paws. "I have so much to tell him— so many things he's missed hearing from me about. And, I can't even visit him at his den! It's too far away for me to go there and back without my absence being noticed by the clan."

May tilted her head to the side. "Why not just do it anyway? Go see him!"

Slatewhisker shook his head helplessly, but May ignored him, giving his shoulder an insistent nudge with her muzzle.

"Come on!" she said. "Do it for my sake as much as yours. I don't think I've heard you purr once since he's been gone. If I have to listen to you lamenting for one more night, it's going to make me as miserable as you are."

Slatewhisker sighed and despondently flopped to the ground.

"I can't," he said. "The rogues are affecting SkyClan too. We're all really busy with them during the day, so if I was gone then, it would definitely be noticed. It's already hard enough for me to sneak away and get here at night with our increased patrolling."

May narrowed her eyes in confusion.

"And, why again does it matter if your clan-mates see you traveling here?" she asked. "It's not like you're trespassing on another clan's territory, so why is it a big deal?"

"We're just..." Slatewhisker said, waving his paw vaguely as his voice trailed off. "I'm not sure how to explain it because you're right that it doesn't make a lot of sense. But, my clan-mates don't trust cats that aren't like them— be it if they're from another clan, or if they're kittypets, or loners. There's already rumors about me in SkyClan. No one knows anything for sure, but cats *have* noticed me sneaking away. Or, I don't groom your scent off me completely. Or... I don't know. But, they say that I've been hanging out with kittypets."

"You are," May said bluntly.

Slatewhisker shot her a look.

"I know, but it looks bad," he insisted.

May scowled. "But *why?"*

Slatewhisker sighed. "I just told you why. And, it will look even worse now with the rogues causing so much trouble. If I'm caught, I'll be looked at with more than just suspicion. They might think I'm a traitor."

May scoffed.

"I think half of the codes you all follow are ridiculous," she meowed.

Slatewhisker shrugged helplessly.

"Maybe they are, but I can't—"

Slatewhisker's voice cut off abruptly at the sound of a snapping twig. May sat up straight, her ears pricked and her blue eyes wide as they scanned the dark area around them. Slatewhisker slowly and silently lifted himself back to his paws, positioning himself in front of May in case he needed to protect her.

"The rogues?" she asked in a voice barely above a breath.

"I hope so," Slatewhisker whispered back. "Better them than my clan-mates..."

A shadow ducked into the yard under the fence, and Slatewhisker unsheathed his claws, but he relaxed again when he caught a familiar scent. May's eyes brightened as she recognized him at the same moment Slatewhisker did.

"Paledusk!" May purred, bounding over to him.

Paledusk purred in return, gently touching his nose to her ear in greeting.

"Hello, love," he said as he pulled back, blinking down at her.

"Great StarClan, Paledusk! You nearly gave me a heart-attack," Slatewhisker snapped, shaking out his pelt as he padded over to them.

"I didn't know you'd be coming tonight," May added, tilting her head curiously.

"Unfortunately I can't stay," Paledusk rumbled. "I just came to collect Slatewhisker."

Slatewhisker's ears pricked.

"Me?" he said. "Is something wrong?"

"You're absence has been noted," Paledusk said, scowling when his attention turned from May to Slatewhisker. "Mother was asking for you."

Slatewhisker opened his jaws.

"Don't worry, I covered for you," Paledusk said with a dismissive wave of his tail. "But, with the number of long 'night-hunts' you've been on, and yet with such little prey you've been bringing back... cats were bound to start getting suspicious soon. And, you know that Mother has been more clingy since Father died."

"But, I have to—" Slatewhisker began.

"See if Pepper managed to get out. I'm aware." Paledusk's scowl deepened. "But, you're being reckless, brother. You can't keep coming here every night to see if Pepper was able to make it this time. The rogue trespassers are already setting the Clan on edge. And, you have more responsibilities to SkyClan now. Or, have you already forgotten that Doepelt is expecting your kits?"

Slatewhisker's stomach flipped, and he widened his eyes imploringly at Paledusk.

Why did he have to bring that up now?! He knows I haven't told May yet!

May's jaw dropped open in shock. She whirled around to glare at Slatewhisker.

"What?! You're having kits!" she said, her blue gaze hurt and heated. "Does Pepper know?! How could you? You'll break his heart!"

"I didn't go behind Pepper's back!" Slatewhisker meowed hotly, his ears burning and his stomach clenching at the accusation. "I would never do that! Once Doepelt brought it up to me, I immediately discussed it at length with Pepper. If he had been uncomfortable with it at all, I would've never agreed! I just haven't gotten the chance to tell him that Doepelt's expecting yet because I haven't seen him."

Slatewhisker shot Paledusk another sharp look.

Bird-brain! Why couldn't you have been more tactful in delivering the news to May?!

Paledusk stared back at him, his expression unreadable. May's ears flattened.

"Well why didn't I know until now?" she asked. "And, why are you even having these kits at all? Who is this cat? Doepelt?"

Slatewhisker shrugged helplessly again.

"I just found out that Doepelt was pregnant a little while ago, and I wanted to tell Pepper first," he said. "I promise that I was planning on telling you too. And, as for why, well Doepelt wanted to have a litter, and she asked me if I wanted to be the father. SkyClan could use more young cats..."

"And, also it'd make Slatewhisker appear more loyal to those who might question him," Paledusk added, supremely unhelpful. "Someone with a mate and kits in the Clan would be less likely to betray SkyClan."

May's gaze hardened again at Slatewhisker.

"So you've just been *using* her?" she growled.

"No!" Slatewhisker protested, his ears flattening. "I mean, Doepelt doesn't know about Pepper, obviously, but she knows that I— that I don't have any feelings for her. We're just friends, and she's alright with the arrangement! She just wanted to have kits. I've been transparent with both her and Pepper this whole time." Slatewhisker glared at Paledusk. "It's completely false to imply otherwise."

May hesitated for a moment.

"...Alright," she said finally, settling down some, although her tail still twitched.

Paledusk turned to Slatewhisker.

"We should get going," he meowed. "Birdstrike will start wondering where we are if it gets any later."

Slatewhisker kept glowering at him.

Of course Paledusk would suggest going now, *after* stirring up a hornets' nest by breaking the news about the kits without asking Slatewhisker.

*Why does it so often seem that he **enjoys** causing trouble?!*

"Fine," Slatewhisker snapped, brushing past Paledusk.

"See you later, May," he added in a softer voice from over his shoulder.

Slatewhisker was grateful to see that May still nodded goodbye at him.

So that means that she's not terribly mad at me at least. Although I'm sure she'll still have a lot more questions the next time we meet.

Slatewhisker closed his eyes for a moment. He dearly wished that Pepper was here. Pepper would know how to explain the situation better than Slatewhisker could, and he'd be able to reassure May that he was okay with Slatewhisker siring Doepelt's kits.

Paledusk touched his muzzle to May's, and they murmured something to each other in soft voices before Paledusk turned and bounded after Slatewhisker to catch up as he ducked under the fence.

Slatewhisker's tail twitched as they made their way back into SkyClan woods, refusing to look at his brother even as Paledusk padded up to his side.

"What?" Paledusk asked bluntly, picking up on the irritation radiating off of his pelt in waves.

"It's not fair that I have to go back," Slatewhisker growled. "I haven't seen Pepper in so long! May's a loner who can hunt and fight and move her den wherever she pleases, so you get to see her whenever you want, but I'm stuck waiting on the rare chance Pepper gets out. *And* the rogues aren't hanging around to chase him off. *And* I'm also free to meet with him! It feels like it's impossible for us to ever be together."

"Well what did you expect when you broke the code and fell in love with a kittypet?" Paledusk asked, his voice cold and unsympathetic. "They're at the whim of their twolegs. Their entire lives revolve around them."

Slatewhisker bristled.

"Don't talk about Pepper like that," he snapped, glaring at Paledusk. "Isn't he your friend too?"

Paledusk blinked.

"Relax, Slate. Of course I like Pepper," Paledusk said, his mew softening. "But, you can't change reality."

Slatewhisker huffed out an angry breath.

"Well then maybe it's clan way of life that needs to change," he grumbled.

"The code is what keeps us alive," Paledusk argued, twitching his tail.

Slatewhisker glared at him.

"How can you say that when you have the same problem as me?" Slatewhisker growled. "Don't you love May?"

"Of course I do," Paledusk said smoothly, flicking his ears as if to toss away his accusation like a stray raindrop. "Look, you know I think some of the code is dumb too. But, the clans are stuck in their ways. I mean, pick any of our clan-mates for example— they won't change! Can you imagine what our mother would say if she knew about May or Pepper? Or if she even just found out you love another *tom?"*

The fur on Slatewhisker's shoulders bristled. He knew his brother was just suggesting a hypothetical, but for a fraction of a moment, it felt like a real threat instead. However, Paledusk continued before Slatewhisker had the chance to dwell on it.

"They wouldn't ever understand. So, have you ever thought that maybe this is for the best?" Paledusk asked.

Slatewhisker blinked.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Paledusk turned to him, halting their journey through the woods. His green eyes were serious but also gentle as he gazed at Slatewhisker.

"Maybe you and Pepper should just go back to being friends," Paledusk meowed softly. "You two can hardly even see each other these days, and you missing him is distracting you from your duties. The clan already knows you and Doepelt and having kits together; you could see if you could have a real relationship with her. It'd get the clan off of your back, and may also bring you less heartache."

Slatewhisker blinked hard, a lump forming in the back of his throat.

"No. I can't do that to Pepper," he rasped. "And, I can't do that to myself. I love him. Besides, I have no idea if Doepelt would even want more than a friendship with me."

"But, you're miserable!" Paledusk exclaimed, his gaze widening sympathetically. "I can hardly stand to see you like this, Slatewhisker. I know you love and miss Pepper, but if you can never see him, then what's the point? You're just torturing yourself for no reason."

He's right. Slatewhisker thought bleakly, his ears flattening.

But, then almost immediately, another part of his mind rebelled against it.

How can I just let Pepper go?! Maybe the next time Pepper gets out, I can teach him how to defend himself from the rogues so his twolegs won't be so worried about him. Or, maybe Pepper can find a way to sneak out of his den. And, if all else fails, the rogues can't stay around forever, right?! Fennelstar is so angry with them right now, he'd happily die nine time over just to drive them out!

Paledusk lay his tail over Slatewhisker's shoulders supportively.

"You don't have to make a decision right now," he murmured when Slatewhisker didn't respond. "But, do try to think about it at least."

Why do things have to be this way? Slatewhisker thought desperately. *Maybe if I could just explain things to the clan, they'd understand. Or maybe if I could just stop the rogues, then things could go back to the way they were before.*

Slatewhisker clenched his jaw, and Paledusk studied his expression closely.

"I know that face," he warned. "Look, you can keep seeing Pepper if you want. You know I have nothing against that. I just want you to understand that the clan won't change and neither will the code. So, hoping for that will bring you nothing but more pain."

"How are you always so good at reading my mind?" Slatewhisker sighed, his shoulders sagging.

Paledusk purred and brushed his pelt against his side.

"It's because I'm your brother," he meowed. "And all I want is you to

be safe and happy. Which means, whatever you decide, we have to keep this situation in the shadows. If we don't, things will just be worse for everyone involved."

Paledusk stared at Slatewhisker with intense green eyes.

"Promise me you won't do anything rash, Slatewhisker. Please," Paledusk said.

Slatewhisker sighed again.

"Alright," he said, the words dragged out of him reluctantly. "I promise."

Paledusk blinked at him.

"You know that I'm saying all of this because I just want what's best for you, right?" Paledusk asked.

Despite the annoyance Slatewhisker had felt towards his brother earlier, he still was able to force out a brief rumble of a purr.

"Yeah," he murmured. "I know."

Slatewhisker was sadly getting used to only one silhouette greeting him as he entered into the yard of the old twoleg den. This night, as expected, it was just May who trotted over to him and brushed her muzzle against his in greeting.

"How have you been?" she asked as she pulled back.

Slatewhisker shrugged. "You know— same old, same old."

May nodded. "Pepper sends his regards."

Slatewhisker's heart ached like an old wound that refused to seal. Sometimes his mind went back to that conversation he'd had with Paledusk, when he'd suggested that Slatewhisker try to move on from Pepper. During the times when the chances of ever seeing Pepper again felt truly bleak, Slatewhisker almost considered it.

But, then there were moments like this, where he felt the strength

of his emotions, even if filtered through pain, and he knew he could never do it.

May's gaze flickered behind him.

"Is Paledusk coming tonight?" she asked, a hopeful edge entering her mew.

"Yeah. He's just going to be a bit late. He has a patrol to finish," Slatewhisker said.

He took a seat with a sigh and began to groom some of the fur on his side. A few fresh cuts twinged at the touch, but he gently rasped his tongue over them anyway to keep them clean. May's eyes widened as she noticed the claw wounds.

"Oh no. Was it the rogues?" she growled.

"No, actually. Not this time," Slatewhisker said, before nodding towards the cuts. "These are courtesy of Leafstorm, ThunderClan's deputy."

May's ears perked in surprise. "ThunderClan? What happened?"

Slatewhisker rolled his eyes.

"What always happens— we were fighting over the same strip of land that we always fight over," Slatewhisker said with a bitter snort. "The same pointless fight that we've had for generations, over and over."

May blinked in confusion, her head tilting to the side. "But why?"

"Fennelstar thinks SkyClan needs it. You've seen the destruction the twolegs have been causing lately, inching into the forest and taking more and more pieces of our territory. And, now with the rogues keeping our hunting in the twoleg-place to a minimum, Fennelstar is more convinced than ever that if SkyClan is to survive, we must have more territory," Slatewhisker explained. "SkyClan and ThunderClan have always fought, but things have gotten worse since Darkstar, SkyClan's leader before Fennelstar, gave away a big chunk of our territory. Fennelstar wants to reclaim it. It's been his

burning drive ever since he took over as leader. I think since then, we've fought with ThunderClan over it at least once a season. Sometimes it's ours, sometime's it's theirs. Right now they control it."

Slatewhisker sighed, shaking his head. "I can't even count how many cats have died there, watering those trees with their blood," he muttered in a deeper tone. "Sometimes the fighting feels so futile. It will never end."

May's brow furrowed.

"Why don't you just leave then?" she asked.

Slatewhisker's eyes went round with shock.

"Leave? But where would SkyClan go?" he asked. "There's no other territory in the area big enough to sustain a clan."

May glanced at him sharply.

"I'm not talking about SkyClan, fuzz-brain! I'm talking about you," May said.

Slatewhisker's eyes somehow stretched even wider. "Me?!"

"Yes." May shot him an exasperated look. "Don't look so surprised. You're the one that comes here each time more weary, beat-up, and bitter than the last. Have you really never thought about it? You could leave all that fighting behind you and live like me! Only caring for yourself; free to roam where you please." May twitched her whiskers in self-satisfaction.

Slatewhisker narrowed his eyes.

"Free to roam where you please but always with my brother within your beck and call," he drawled in a dry tone.

May shot him a sharp glance, her blue eyes bright with a fierce mischief.

"Until your brother bores me," she said haughtily, but Slatewhisker

knew there was no real threat behind her words. Any cat with sense could see how taken May was with Paledusk. "But if the way of the loner isn't for you, you could always live like Pepper. His housefolk sound kind."

"Live with twolegs?" he asked in shock.

The fur on Slatewhisker's nape lifted at the thought. He knew that Pepper cared deeply for his housefolk, and they took care of him well in return. But, could Slatewhisker get so used to always being surrounded by the huge, alien creatures? Living even in the same den as them? Slatewhisker still shied away from their touch when he roamed the streets with his friends— even as May allowed the twolegs to stroke her with their big, hairless paws.

"I don't know..." he muttered. Slatewhisker gave his ears a sharp shake. "But, besides, how could I leave my Clan after they've done so much for me?"

May's tail flicked.

"Done so much for you? Like ordering you to fight the same 'pointless' battle over and over?" she asked sharply.

Slatewhisker winced at May's derisive tone. He should not have been so careless with his words. May didn't fully understand what living in a Clan was like, so of course she'd take the least charitable interpretation of what he said.

"It's not like that," Slatewhisker muttered. "Yeah, I don't always agree with Fennelstar's decisions, but listening to our leader is a part of our way of life. It's the price we pay for the community of our Clan— we look out for each other. But, I'd lose all that if I left them and went to live with housefolk. Then I'd be trapped at the twolegs' whims just like Pepper."

May rolled her eyes.

"Are you really less trapped where you are now?" she asked. "Pepper traded his freedom for the safety and comfort housefolk provide him. You've traded your freedom to follow a bunch of codes

you disagree with, and a leader you've never said a single good thing about. At least Pepper likes his housefolk and his home, even when they trap him inside. But, do you even *like* being in SkyClan?"

Slatewhisker stared at May wide-eyed.

What does she mean do I 'like' SkyClan? That's like asking do cats 'like' breathing! SkyClan is simply... a part of me. There's no changing that.

*But you **could** change it,* a quiet thought whispered from the depths of his mind. *Cats have to breathe to live, but cats exist outside of SkyClan. Just look at the cat in front of you.*

Slatewhisker shook his pelt like he was shedding cold rain water from his fur. He had to get it off before it had the chance to sink in and touch his skin.

"SkyClan is my home," Slatewhisker muttered, avoiding May's eyes.

From the corner of his vision, he saw her mouth open again, but Slatewhisker spoke before she could say anything. "Please, May, can you just drop it? Let's talk about something else."

May blinked at him.

"Well fine. If that's what you want," she sighed.

Several tense heartbeats passed by, and Slatewhisker still couldn't make himself look at her.

"I'm sorry," May said, finally breaking the silence. "I didn't mean to be pushy. I just want you to be happy, you know? You don't seem happy in SkyClan, and you seem to miss Pepper so much... But it's your life: your choice. Only you know what's best for yourself."

Slatewhisker remained silent for a few moments more, his stomach twisting into knots. Although her tone was gentle, each one of her words nicked him like a claw wound, until it felt like he was bleeding from dozens of cuts.

*Do I know what's best for myself? Do I even have a choice? I didn't choose to be SkyClan— I just **am.***

Even though it hurts? that same quiet thought from before argued back. *Even though you miss Pepper everyday?*

"Can you not mention this conversation to Paledusk?" Slatewhisker murmured. "He's so loyal to SkyClan... I'm not sure... I don't think he'd understand."

May leaned over and touched her nose to his ear reassuringly.

"Don't worry, my lips are sealed," May said.

Slatewhisker shot her a look, searching her expression for sincerity. "Even though he's your mate?"

May met his gaze levelly.

"He may be my mate, but you're still my friend. I knew you long before I knew Paledusk," May said. "Whatever happens, I think you and I will always be friends."

The next time Slatewhisker pushed his way through the night-darkened undergrowth at the border of the twoleg-place, *two* familiar smells bathed his tongue. Slatewhisker inhaled sharply, his tail curling upwards in sudden joy at the unmistakable scent. Unable to contain himself, he shot forward, abandoning stealth as he sprinted the last few lengths to the decrepit twoleg den. As he exited the undergrowth, he realized that they must be just as impatient to see him, since the two figures were waiting outside the fence for once, facing the forest.

"Pepper!" Slatewhisker yowled, his heart overflowing with happiness as he spotted the white and black-flecked pelt.

Pepper sprung to his paws, a purr bursting from his throat as Slatewhisker nearly tackled him in his rush to headbutt Pepper's chest. A purr also thrummed through Slatewhisker as he twined his way around his mate. May watched on, her eyes half-closed in amused contentment at their enthusiastic greeting.

"StarClan, I can't believe it! You're really here!" Slatewhisker gushed, relief, joy, and shock all coursing through him. "I've missed you so much."

"I missed you too," Pepper said, rasping his tongue over Slatewhisker's forehead.

Slatewhisker pulled away to get a proper look at look at him.

"Are you alright? Did your wounds all heal?" he asked, some worry appearing and dampening his joy.

"I'm perfectly fine," Pepper reassured. "My housefolk took me to their twoleg healers, and they fixed me up quickly. No scars even!"

Slatewhisker exhaled in relief.

"But my housefolk have been *way* too protective since then," Pepper continued, his tail beginning to twitch as irritation darkened his expression. "They refused to allow me out no matter how much I asked and begged at the door. I even started clawing it, and they still didn't open it!"

"How did you even make it here?" Slatewhisker asked, blinking curiously. "I was starting to worry they would never let you out of the den again at all! It's been over a moon since I last saw you!"

Pepper's face brightened.

"It was actually all May's idea! She distracted them," he said.

"I yowled from the bushes in front of the house like my tail had been cut off," May spoke up, her whiskers twitching smugly. "They were totally fooled."

Pepper nodded along, his chest puffing out in pride. "Then when they went out to investigate, I darted between their legs and out the door!" Pepper then softened as he looked at Slatewhisker again. "I know that they'll be upset and worried about me, but it was worth it to get to see you."

Slatewhisker's heart filled with affection, and he pressed his muzzle to Pepper's.

"Thank you. Thank you both," he added with a glance at May. "I'm so lucky to have such a clever friend and mate."

May dipped her head, but brushed off his praise with a flick of her ears.

"Don't thank me too much yet," she said. "I don't know if the same trick will work twice."

Slatewhisker's heart dropped with sudden disappointment. He hadn't yet considered if the twolegs would be fooled another time if Pepper wanted to get out again.

"Lets not think about that yet," Pepper mewed gently. "We can worry about that problem *if* it happens. Maybe when I return uninjured and healthy tonight, they will understand that it's safe for me to go outside again."

Slatewhisker nodded, but on the inside, anxiety still whirled. Pepper was optimistic, but what if when he went back to his den, his twolegs instead *redoubled* their efforts to keep him locked away? Would Slatewhisker have to wait another moon to see him?

Or will it be two moons? Or will he be kept away, ***forever?***

"Yeah," Slatewhisker said, even though his mind remained stuck on the despairing thoughts like a stubborn tick. "We still have the whole night together. Lets not talk about any of that ye—"

"Rogues!"

The sudden yowl drowned out Slatewhisker's voice and sent him rocketing to his paws, every hair on his pelt standing on end as the scent of SkyClan rushed in on the breeze.

Oh StarClan, I know that voice.

Horror and dismay flooded Slatewhisker as a shadow streaked from the bushes, heading directly towards May.

"Stop!" Slatewhisker yowled, darting forward.

May let out a surprised cry as the large, fluffy form bowled her over, snarling like a badger. May was clearly caught off guard by the attack, but she recovered quickly. She managed to wiggle out

from underneath the SkyClan warrior's paws and leap into a fighting pose. Slatewhisker's stomach twisted as he saw his friend's claws glinting in the moonlight as she exchanged blows with her attacker.

"No, May!" Slatewhisker said, his desperation growing. "Stop fighting, both of you!"

Pepper stepped towards May, seeming to try to push her back. But, the instant Pepper entered into the attacker's reach, she switched targets. The SkyClan warrior slashed towards Pepper's face, her long, curved claws extended to their full, deadly length. Slatewhisker's heart clenched in terror.

"Enough!" he snarled.

He shoved his shoulder into the SkyClan warrior's side, knocking her away from Pepper and May before her blow could land. She was forced to stumble back a few steps before she regained her balance. Only then did Slatewhisker's mother look at him; he now the sole target of the fury in her green eyes.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Birdstrike snarled, her bushy tail lashing in a frenzy.

Slatewhisker didn't move his gaze off of her, fairly certain that she would lunge back towards his friends if he gave her half the chance.

"May, Pepper, you need to leave. Right now," Slatewhisker said in a low voice.

"But—" May began to protest from behind him.

"Now," Slatewhisker hissed between his fangs. "Please... go."

Slatewhisker waited until he heard the sound of their pawsteps fading behind him and a few moments longer, just to be safe they were long gone, before he abruptly broke eye-contact with Birdstrike. Slatewhisker jerked back towards the undergrowth and started to stalk off.

"Don't you dare walk away from me!" Birdstrike snarled, sounding

more furious than he'd ever heard her. "Explain yourself, Slatewhisker!"

"I don't have anything to explain to you," Slatewhisker growled, his stomach rolling with betrayal and anger.

He heard a flurry of pawsteps behind him, and for a heartbeat, he thought his mother may actually pounce on him, but instead, she just rushed in front of him, halting him in his tracks. An inferno raged in her eyes, and her lips were curled back to display every fang.

"Treachery demands an explanation," she spat.

The bushes behind Birdstrike rustled. Slatewhisker's head jerked up, dread flooding through him at the thought of another clan-mate coming upon the scene. But, he relaxed a fraction as he recognized Paledusk's white-furred form. His brother blinked at him evenly.

"Mother and I were patrolling in the area and caught your scent," Paledusk said.

Paledusk blinked at him again, his ears angling back in a silent apology, and Slatewhisker heard the words he left unsaid.

I'm sorry. I tried to stop her.

Slatewhisker clenched his fangs together to stop his own reply from slipping from his jaws.

Did you really? Then why didn't you come out earlier? You could have helped me protect May and Pepper from her!

But, the cynical part of Slatewhisker's mind already knew the answer to that question— It wouldn't have done any good for Paledusk to out himself too and get in trouble along with Slatewhisker, right? Why should Paledusk also suffer under the brunt of their mother's rage, when he wasn't the one caught in the act?

Slatewhisker looked away from Paledusk, his eyes dropping down to his paws. He understood why Paledusk made his choice, even

though it still stung.

*If he had gotten in trouble with me, I'd at least have **someone's** support right now.*

"Well?" Birdstrike demanded as Slatewhisker's silence stretched on. "Speak! Tell me what good reason you have to be consorting with rogues!"

Slatewhisker shot her a burning glance. "My friends aren't rogues! They have nothing to do with the cats that SkyClan has been fighting."

"You foolish kit! They're all the same," Birdstrike hissed, shaking her head. "Rogues, loners, kittypets— you disgrace your family by associating with any of them! You're lucky that it was only your brother and I that found you! Aren't there enough rumors about your loyalty already?! I thought you'd started down a better path when you took Doepelt as your mate, but you've still been sneaking around here behind all of our backs!"

"Doepelt is *not* my mate!" Slatewhisker ground out between his fangs. "She doesn't even want me to be her mate! Ask her if you don't believe me! I fathered her kits because she asked me to, but that was it!"

"And, I shudder to think of what your father would think if he was alive to see this!" Birdstrike continued ranting as if he hadn't even spoken. "How could you so terribly shame his memory when Icerunner's body is still practically warm in the ground?"

Slatewhisker stiffened, sudden cold creeping up his muscles and dousing the burning flames of rage.

"I don't care what Father would think of me," he growled.

Slatewhisker had hardly thought it possible for Birdstrike to get anymore angry, but somehow additional fury flared to life in her eyes.

"How dare you?!" she spat, her pelt bristling out around her. "Icerunner was one of the most noble, loyal SkyClan warriors to

have ever lived! He was going to lead SkyClan back to greatness after Darkstar rolled over and showed his belly to all the Clans of the forest! But now with Robinsong replacing him as deputy, Fennelstar has already started to become *softer.* Without Icerunner pushing him, Fennelstar doesn't have the fire to do what is needed to make SkyClan powerful again! And it was your little friends that snatched that chance away from us."

"I already told you, my friends had nothing to do with the attacks on SkyClan!" Slatewhisker snarled.

"But it was rogues who murdered your father!" Birdstrike spat.

Slatewhisker scoffed, the noise torn out of some dark, bitter place that he usually tucked deep down inside— only showing on occasion to vent to his friends, but never revealing to his clan-mates. But, he was too angry now to care to keep it hidden.

"It may be rogues that struck the blow, but Icerunner died at his own paw," Slatewhisker hissed, the words spilling out from a broken dam. "He underestimated them. He went in there knowingly outnumbered. Then he provoked them, when they'd already proved themselves to be dangerous. He thought he was invincible just because his enemies didn't have clan-blood! What *killed* Icerunner was his own willful arrogance."

"That's enough!" Birdstrike shrieked.

Her paw was a blur through the air, and Slatewhisker didn't even have a chance to flinch back. His ear burned as she raked her claws over it, and he instantly felt blood welling in the cuts. Slatewhisker froze, and Birdstrike did the same, her bloody claws still extended between them as she panted from emotion. Slatewhisker stared at her, shock that his mother had actually clawed him overpowering most of his anger. Birdstrike seemed stunned as well, her eyes stretched so wide, a ring of white appeared around her irises. With apparent effort, Birdstrike sheathed her claws and paced back a step.

"...That's enough," Birdstrike repeated, her voice a much lower rasp this time. She took a deep, shuddering breath. "No matter what, you

are still my son, Slatewhisker. So, your brother and I will not breathe a word of this night to anyone. But, do not speak of your father like that again. I won't tolerate it."

Birdstrike exhaled sharply, turning away from him. "Now let's put this whole thing behind us. I'm sure you've learned your lesson. It's time to go home."

Without another word, Birdstrike headed into the forest, and Paledusk chose that moment to finally pad over to Slatewhisker.

"I'm sorry," Paledusk muttered in his ear.

"Save it," Slatewhisker snapped, glaring at his brother as anger flared back to life in his chest.

Paledusk had done a whole lot of nothing this entire time— just watching from the undergrowth as Birdstrike attacked their mates, and then not saying a peep as she tore into Slatewhisker, both figuratively and literally.

Paledusk watched him, his expression even. Slatewhisker didn't know how he could still look so composed after all that. He jerked his gaze away from Paledusk, anger bubbling just beneath his pelt as he followed Birdstrike into the woods and back to camp.

Dozens of different emotions stormed in Slatewhisker's heart as he stepped out of the undergrowth and followed his well-trodden trail around the outskirts of the abandoned twoleg den. His gaze flickered over the colored fragments of glass in the windows, and he took in the sharp peak of the den where he'd spent so many nights staring out into the distance. The sights comforted him, but Slatewhisker still hesitated when he reached the edge of the fence and new thunderpaths stretched out before him.

It wasn't uncertainty that stilled his paws— the directions for how to get to Pepper's den were seared into his thoughts. But still, Slatewhisker lingered.

He hadn't gotten to see Pepper since that night Birdstrike interrupted their meeting— it seemed like Pepper's twolegs were

still keeping him shut inside the den as best they could. But, Slatewhisker had been able to meet with May, and he'd had her pass a message to Pepper.

Slatewhisker couldn't do this any longer. For so many moons, he had tried— he'd tried to be a good SkyClan warrior, a good friend, a good mate, a good son, and a good brother. But, it was too much. Now with Doepelt's kitting time growing closer, the burden of the act pressed all the more heavy on his back. It was crushing.

When his clan-mates congratulated him on their kits, how could he pretend that he was excited about becoming a father, when in reality, his mind was only occupied by Pepper? All he thought about was when he would get to see him again. Or, *how* he would see him again, with Birdstrike watching his every move like a hawk and the fighting with the rogues growing more intense, making Slatewhisker's trips to the border all the more risky.

Slatewhisker knew that he'd promised Paledusk that he wouldn't do anything rash, but he couldn't keep living this shadow-life. He wanted to be with Pepper. *Really* with him. Even if it meant leaving behind everything else he'd ever known.

Slatewhisker cast a final glance over his shoulder and back towards SkyClan's forest. The frost had come early this season, and the elders warned that meant a long, hard leaf-bare was on its way. A lump formed in the back of Slatewhisker's throat as he thought about all the cats that he was abandoning to face the cold without him— slipping away without even a proper goodbye. They were his friends, his family... But, he knew what his clan-mates would say if he told them the truth. No one would understand. It was probably better this way, for him to simply vanish. Then they could at least comfort themselves with the idea that he'd died a noble death somewhere.

Slatewhisker closed his eyes for a moment to compose himself.

He was hurting, but not from indecision. Slatewhisker may have not been able to keep his promise to Paledusk, but his brother had been right about one thing— the clans would not understand him, and they would not change. The only option he had was to leave.

May had passed Slatewhisker's decision onto Pepper. If Pepper was able to escape from his twolegs this morning, he was to meet him here, and they would go back to his den— *their* den— together. But, if Pepper couldn't make it out, Slatewhisker felt confident that he could find his way there alone. He had the directions seared into his mind and his heart.

Slatewhisker turned around, his gaze searching the twoleg-place ahead of him. There was no sign of his mate, but for the first time, that didn't bother Slatewhisker. Instead, his chest filled with hope and anticipation. He would see him soon.

I'm coming to you, Pepper.

The sun had just started to rise to mark the dawning of his new life, and Slatewhisker strode into the light.

"Where are you going?" a low voice said from behind him.

Slatewhisker jerked and spun around, his pelt bristling.

Paledusk was a few fox-lengths away, his face covered in the shadows cast by the abandoned twoleg den. It masked his expression, but Slatewhisker could see the glimmer of his green eyes from the shade.

"Oh, Paledusk," Slatewhisker said, breathing a sigh of relief, although his pelt still prickled from the scare. "What are you doing here?"

Paledusk took a step forward, letting the light fall fully onto his face. "I saw you leave the camp."

His green eyes bore into Slatewhisker's. Slatewhisker swallowed and found his tongue suddenly parched.

There was something odd in Paledusk's expression.

On the surface, he looked perfectly normal... why didn't he look normal? His green eyes were bright, and his sleek white pelt was groomed to perfection as always. But, there was something about him Slatewhisker couldn't quite pin down. It was like seeing his

brother's reflection in a pool. It was a perfect copy, but it lacked substance. There was no brush of solid fur— no real warmth or heat. He was... blank.

"What are you doing here, Slatewhisker?" Paledusk pressed. "It's morning. Far too late for you to be meeting with May or Pepper. Our clan-mates will notice that you're missing."

Slatewhisker's mouth was too dry to form the words to respond. Paledusk wouldn't stop staring at him. His eyes hadn't moved from Slatewhisker's—he hadn't even blinked—the whole time he'd been talking. But, Paledusk didn't need him to answer. It was clear from the tightness in his expression that he already knew.

"You're leaving aren't you?" he asked.

Paledusk's words came out eerie and soft, nothing at all like the deep, rich timbre he typically spoke with. That tenuous voice made Slatewhisker's gut twist in warning.

Something isn't right with him.

Slatewhisker felt the sudden urge to lie. He wasn't sure that Paledusk could handle the truth right now, not in this strange, fragile state-of-mind.

Slatewhisker opened his mouth, but no sound came out. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't deceive his brother straight to his face. He couldn't send Paledusk home, only for him to realize that Slatewhisker never came back after him... He would never forgive Slatewhisker for it.

"...Yes," Slatewhisker admitted, his whiskers drooping. "I'm going to be with Pepper."

An emotion finally crawled into Paledusk's expression— confusion.

"But, you can't," Paledusk said, his tail beginning to twitch.

Slatewhisker's brow furrowed. "Yes I can. You said it yourself: our clan-mates won't change. If I want to be happy, I have to go."

Paledusk took one sudden, aggressive step towards Slatewhisker, making him jerk in alarm, but Paledusk stilled himself just as quickly as he had sprung into motion.

"No," Paledusk said in that same quiet voice. "You can't leave. You're *my* brother. You have to stay in our clan."

Slatewhisker's heart ached. He sighed.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way," he said, unable to meet Paledusk's eyes. "But, I can't stay... You can still visit me though, right? It'll be okay."

Paledusk finally blinked at him. The confusion on his face began to dim as a fury as cold as the leaf-bare frost grew to replace it. A shiver ran down Slatewhisker's spine as Paledusk's eyes narrowed into green slits. He bared his fangs, a growl bursting from his throat.

"'Okay?' *'Okay?!'* You *coward!"* Paledusk dug his claws into the ground as he vibrated with wrath. "You're going ruin everything! The whole clan is going to know that you ran off! That my brother is a traitor!"

Tension crackled in the air between them like lightning. Slatewhisker's pads grew damp with perspiration, and he shrank back from his brother. His chest suddenly felt tight with uncertainty, but he grasped desperately at the resolve that had brought him this far. The resolve that he finally had after so long to do *something,* for once in his sorry life.

Slatewhisker lifted his chin. "I don't care what any of them say about me anymore."

"Idiot!" Paledusk snarled, tail lashing. "Of course you wouldn't care what they say after you run away! This isn't about you. This is about *me.* You're ruining me! My reputation. Brother of a *kittypet."* He spat the final word like a curse.

Slatewhisker stared at him, anger, fear, and confusion battling within him.

"What's *wrong* with you?!" Slatewhisker asked, his claws unsheathing reflexively in the face of Paledusk's aggression. "You never seemed to care about Pepper being a kittypet before!"

"Pepper is a nobody, who no-one knows or cares about," Paledusk spat, pacing. "You on the other paw—" Slatewhisker watched with a wide, shocked gaze as Paledusk began circling him like a hawk, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "—you're a SkyClan cat, *my* kin. And, I won't let you do this to me."

Slatewhisker bared his teeth defiantly, but his panicked heart pounded against his ribs.

He'd never seen Paledusk like this before. He'd always known his brother was prone to bouts of anger or callousness, sometimes even for seemingly no reason. But, those always faded as quickly as dew on a hot, green-leaf morning, and then he was back to his normal, charming self.

This though was something else. A specter of pure rage now wore the pelt of his brother.

"I'm going," Slatewhisker growled, his blood drumming in his ears. "And, you can't change my mind."

Paledusk curled his lip up, fangs gleaming pearly in the morning light.

"So be it," he growled.

Paledusk exploded at Slatewhisker without warning.

Slatewhisker yowled as he bowled him over, the claws of Paledusk's hind-legs raking down his side repeatedly, yanking out fur and flesh. They tumbled, and Paledusk ended up on top, his claws buried deep in his shoulder fur.

Slatewhisker's heart twisted in sickening dread as he gazed up at Paledusk with wide, horrified eyes.

"Stop it!" Slatewhisker hissed, his fore-paws pressed against Paledusk's chest. "I won't fight you. You're my brother!"

He grappled with Paledusk, but his efforts to push him off were futile— Paledusk had him pinned firmly to the ground. Their gazes connected.

Paledusk looked at him with empty eyes. It was as if this moment was the first time they'd ever met, and they shared none of the lifetime of memories Slatewhisker had of the two of them together.

"Then you're even weaker than I thought," Paledusk snarled.

His fangs flashed towards Slatewhisker's throat, and instinct took over.

Slatewhisker tucked his chin to protect his neck, and Paledusk's teeth instead met his left eye. Slatewhisker yowled as Paledusk's fangs punctured the sensitive flesh, his head filled with sudden stabbing pain. Half his vision went dark as the nauseating scent of blood filled his nostrils, and Slatewhisker slumped limply against the ground.

A shrill ringing noise echoed in Slatewhisker's ears, over and over again. His breathing came out in short, panicked gasps. The only coherent feeling was pain.

Paledusk withdrew, stepping off of him, and he watched with a chilling sort of curiosity as Slatewhisker twitched and panted on the ground. Paledusk's gaze flickered back and forth from the ring of white showing around Slatewhisker's one shocked eye, to the other one, a managed mess of blood and gore.

Shock won over the pain in Slatewhisker's mind, turning him numb. Instead of agony, his mind instead chose to focus on the sensation of blood running through his cheek fur.

"Get up," Paledusk said in a cold voice.

The most Slatewhisker could manage to do was laboriously roll over, dragging his legs back underneath him.

A paw came slamming down on his head, claws raking down his muzzle, and Slatewhisker screamed as they slashed through the carnage that had already been done to his face. Slatewhisker

collapsed back to the ground, and Paledusk prowled around him, watching for any sign of moment.

"Get up," Paledusk growled.

Slatewhisker didn't obey this time.

His chest heaved as shock transform to detachment. This couldn't really be happening. Certainly not to *him,* by his own brother.

That's it. This isn't real. This isn't happening.

Slatewhisker closed his good eye, trying to wake up from the nightmare. But, the shock and hurt didn't fade, and he didn't open his eyes to find himself curled up in his nest.

Then, some sort of primitive instinct, which cared neither for the facts that Slatewhisker had just lost an eye, nor that he was being mauled by his own brother, managed to pierce through the fog in his mind.

Move, it ordered. *Survive.*

Slatewhisker ground his fangs. His focus was weakened with pain and shock, but he managed to cling desperately to the instinct. It was the only way he would live through this. Slatewhisker took a deep, trembling breath and summoned his strength.

As Paledusk circled him again, Slatewhisker suddenly surged to life. He sprung upwards with as much speed and might he could muster, slashing for Paledusk's face.

His paw made solid contact. Paledusk hissed as Slatewhisker's claws sliced through the flesh of his cheek, ripping red lines of blood through his sea of perfect white fur. Paledusk stumbled backwards in surprise, and Slatewhisker lunged around him, his heartbeat already hammering in preparation to send his paws fleeing through the twoleg-place.

He made it two strides before Paledusk tackled him.

Paledusk's claws latched onto his back as he pinned him to the

ground again. He snarled as he sunk his fangs into each of Slatewhisker's ears in turn, shredding them. Slatewhisker hardly felt the pain underneath the burst of bright panic that exploded in his chest.

He bucked and writhed, but he couldn't throw Paledusk.

A low growl rumbled through Paledusk the whole while. He wasn't cold and detached now. It was as if Slatewhisker fighting back had finally made it personal.

Slatewhisker whipped his head to the side, trying to snap at the paw digging into his shoulder. Paledusk used his other paw to hit him hard against the newly blinded side of his head.

Stunned, Slatewhisker collapsed back against the ground, but Paledusk seemed to know better than to toy with him this time. In a barrage of seemingly never-ending attacks, Paledusk began to chip away at him. Slatewhisker managed to stumble back to his paws a few times, but each time, Paledusk was there, slamming him back to the ground, shredding his flesh into ribbons and snarling as he clawed his body apart, piece by piece.

Soon, Slatewhisker had no more energy left to fight. The heartbeats dragged on. Slatewhisker flinched as claws sliced through his flesh again and again, but sensation was dimming. Each blow now just felt like a dull thump, regardless how much skin Paledusk carved away or the amount of blood that spurted out of Slatewhisker.

Splotches of black floated in his vision, the world fading in and out. Some part of him knew that blood loss would pull him fully unconscious soon, and death would follow not long after.

It could've lasted for eons more or just one heartbeat, but finally, the blows stopped. Slatewhisker's vision came into focus one last time to rest on the blood-spattered paws that stood in front of him. They were so thoroughly soaked, no white shown beneath the layer of red. Paledusk hesitated as if contemplating landing a final blow, or just letting nature take its course as Slatewhisker's heart pumped the last drops of blood from his body.

Slatewhisker's one remaining eyelid drooped to await the end.

As the final dregs of his strength drained away, the world turned into a series of barely coherent flashes between the ever growing presence of darkness.

There was a strange sound at the edge of Slatewhisker's dying hearing.

Something or someone was coming.

The blood-red paws were gone.

A white and black mottled face stared at him instead, yellow eyes wide with anguish and horror.

"Stay with me Slatewhisker! I'm going to get help! Please! Just hold on!"

Pepper.

Sorrow pierced Slatewhisker's heart. Instead of their bright future together, this would be the last memory of him he'd ever have.

I'm sorry.

His eye closed, and the world faded to nothingness.

The kittypets had finished recounting the tale, but Frostmask just sat in stunned silence. She didn't think she was capable of doing anything else as she processed everything they'd told her—everything that filled her with disgust and dread and horror, but oddly not as much surprise as she expected.

Frostmask's jaw clenched in a grim realization.

I've seen it before— his true nature, in flashes... I just never understood the depths of it. But, how could I, when his own brother was blind to it until the end?

Fear and resignation settled in the pit of Frostmask's stomach. It was everything she'd feared about Paledusk, but also so much more.

Bile rose in the back of her throat, threatening to make her sick. She felt like a mouse that had woken from a long sleep to realize that she'd been sharing a nest with a snake.

Sedgestar was right about my father... He's been right all along. StarClan, I've been so stupid!

Frostmask turned to Salt, meeting his remaining eye. She saw it now. The brothers' irises were the same vibrant green, but there was a harshness to Paledusk's gaze that his lacked.

"Then you are Slatewhisker," she rasped finally. "My kin."

He dipped his head.

"I *was* Slatewhisker, but I'm just Salt now," he replied. "It's better for Slatewhisker to have died that day. That way, no one comes looking for me."

"How *did* you survive?" she asked softly, staring at his scars with a new horror.

Salt shot a fond look down at his mate.

"Pepper saved me," he said softly.

Pepper shook his ears. "All I did was go get my housefolk."

"But your injuries..." Frostmask's gaze drifted over the crater in his face.

Salt shrugged. "I know. Even I don't know how I lived, honestly. I'd been convinced that I would wake in the next life, but twoleg healers are powerful. All I know is one moment, I'm bleeding out on the thunderpath, and the next I'm in a strange twoleg den. I was trapped in a box, but in a lot less pain than I was before."

Salt glanced over at Pepper.

"I have trouble remembering what came afterwards, but I do know I was frightened," he admitted. "The healer's place smelled like all kinds of injured or sick animals, although the twolegs there were

kind to me. After some time, Pepper's housefolk came and got me, and then they took me back here to him."

Pepper leaned against his side, giving Salt's shoulder fur a few gentle licks as if to wash away the bad memories. Salt exhaled a deep, shaky breath and pressed his face against Pepper's.

Frostmask hesitated for a moment. "Did you ever see May again?" she asked. "After Paledusk..."

Salt clenched his jaw, shaking his head. "Once I'd healed enough, I was so afraid that Paledusk would find me, or hurt Pepper, we never went back to our abandoned twoleg den or dared venture into the forest to look for her. We had no idea what happened to May, until you told us. I don't know why she never came back here to Pepper's den. Paledusk must have told her something, or *done* something, to keep her from visiting him."

"Paledusk said that you were dead," Frostmask muttered. "That the rogues killed you. That's what he told SkyClan at least."

Salt rumbled a bitter purr that contained no trace of humor.

"I can't say I'm surprised," he said.

Frostmask nodded before she suddenly felt a lump form in the back of her throat. A terrifying new possibility had just occurred to her.

"You don't think that May knew that Paledusk—" she whispered in horror, but Salt cut her off by shaking his head vehemently.

"No. I don't think May knew a thing about what Paledusk was really like," Salt said with a growl. "She was a good cat."

Pepper nodded in agreement. "She would've been gone in an instant, if she knew the truth."

Frostmask relaxed, her fears calming. Salt stared at her in silence for several long heartbeats, his green eye round and mournful.

"I'm sorry that we weren't able to warn May," he rasped finally. "Paledusk was right about one thing at least. I *am* a coward. Instead

of trying to help her, I spent my time hiding here in this house. If I had tried to find her, I could've maybe... Maybe she'd still be alive. Maybe your littermates would be too."

Frostmask swallowed around the lump in her throat, her heart twisting. Salt dipped his head in grief, but when his eye drifted back up to Frostmask a few moments later, his gaze had hardened into flint.

"It may be too late for me to make it up to them, but I can ensure you don't make the same mistake your mother and I did." Salt bared his fangs, a deep growl rumbling in his throat. His body trembled, although from fear or anger, Frostmask couldn't tell. "You came here looking for answers about your parents, so here they are: *Never* underestimate Paledusk. He doesn't think or *feel* things like the rest of us do, so he won't hesitate to do something that you believe is unthinkable. The only thing he cares about is himself, and if he's told you anything otherwise... *it's a lie."*

Confrontation

Frostmask's legs shook as she rose to her paws, her mind so full of terrifying thoughts about Paledusk, it seemed about to overflow.

Underneath that, though, there were a current of hurt too. She could feel it, roiling and churning, threatening to shatter through the fragile veneer of terror and rage above. If Frostmask allowed it to get free— if she dwelled in the pain of betrayal from a cat who was her family, who was supposed to care for her over almost everyone else, who had spent moons meticulously prying her hard-won trust from her heart— the powerful emotion would drown her. But, Frostmask ruthlessly shoved it back down beneath the surface. She couldn't afford to feel it now. Not when so many lives could be at stake.

"I need you to go back to the Clans with me," she rasped to Salt.

"I can't," he said firmly, without hesitation.

Frostmask's shoulder fur bristled. Couldn't Salt see what a precarious situation this put her in? He had told her all these terrible secrets, but now refused to follow through with bringing the truth to light? She needed allies to stop Paledusk!

"I have no proof of anything you told me without you," she said in a low voice. "Paledusk is SkyClan's deputy now. He's one of their most respected and looked up to warriors. Can't you imagine how dangerous he is in that position?! I'll probably be able to warn my clan-mates since ShadowClan has no love for SkyClan, but I won't be able to convince Fennelstar of anything bad about Paledusk based on just my word alone. He will continue to be a threat, looming over all the Clans."

"But *my* word will help convince Fennelstar?" Salt shook head incredulously. "Frostmask, remember I'm a traitor. A *deserter*. I left SkyClan to become a kittypet. Fennelstar may even feel exactly the same as Paledusk— it'd be better if I was dead, than what I am

now."

Frostmask flexed her claws anxiously into the ground. She knew that Fennelstar could be cruel at times, but surely he wasn't completely heartless, right?

"But Paledusk trying to *murder* his own brother?" she asked. "You really think Fennelstar and the rest of SkyClan would be okay with that? You have the scars on your pelt as proof of your brother's attack. If you're worried about them not believing you because you're a kittypet, you could even say that Paledusk trying to kill you is what drove you away from SkyClan to become one in the first place."

Salt shook his head.

"No," he growled, his one eye narrowing in disgust. "I spent far too much of my life lying about who I am and what I want— to myself and to every other cat. I won't start lying about it again now, even if the truth would turn others against me."

Frostmask's whiskers drooped, her mind shifting to Mottledflame and Larchtail. "Okay, but if you told the truth, there are good cats in SkyClan too, who would probably understand and believe you. You were once a SkyClan cat, so you must know that as well as I do, if not better. I know one of your kits actually... She's kind."

Salt suddenly wouldn't meet her gaze.

"Please, Salt," Frostmask said, almost begging now. "Fennelstar has grown old and sick. We need to act now before Paledusk becomes SkyClan's leader. Then, he'd be so powerful, there would be nothing we could do to stop him and all the harm he can cause."

Salt sighed, his eye closing for a moment.

"If it was only myself at stake, I might come with you and try to speak to Fennelstar," Salt muttered. "But, it's not only my life at risk if I reveal myself."

Pepper's ears twisted back in protest.

"Salt..." he began.

"Don't," Salt meowed quickly, cutting him off and sending him a burning glance. "There's nothing you can say to convince me. I *can't* let you get hurt. I could never forgive myself if Paledusk killed you. I wouldn't have anything left to live for."

Frostmask's ears flattened. As much as she needed Salt's word and existence backing her up, she couldn't find it in herself to argue against him on that.

Wouldn't I probably do the same if I was in his position, and it was Autumnleap or our kits' lives on the line?

Frostmask bowed her head, conceding the argument, but her belly still knotted and twisted in despair.

"But then what am I going to *do?"* she whispered. "Paledusk has them all fooled. *Stars,* he had me fooled for so long. He fed me so many lies and manipulated me for so long. How can I stop him now?"

"Paledusk isn't invincible," Salt insisted. "Sure, he's intelligent and tries to tie up his loose ends, but he makes mistakes like anyone else — you and I are both literally, living proof of that."

Frostmask glanced back up at him, her brow furrowed as she tried to understand his point.

Salt met her eyes, and his lips twisted into an ironic grimace. "I'm still alive because he left me bleeding out, certain that he'd wounded me enough that I'd die. He saw me as worthless, and Pepper as weak. He never considered that Pepper might find me, or that his twolegs would be powerful enough to heal me, or that they'd even care to." Salt blinked at her. "Then there's you. You're here, *alive,* despite what happened to your mother and littermates. He thought that you wouldn't be a threat to him; that he could trick you and use you. But, he was wrong. I can see how strong, brave, and clever you are, and because of that, you found the truth despite all of his efforts to hide it."

Salt leaned towards her, a fire burning in his green gaze. "His arrogance is his weakness. It will make him make a mistake again, and when he does, you will be ready."

After a few moments of hesitation, Frostmask nodded, swallowing around the lump in her throat. She was still a mouse in the nest of a snake, but at least she now saw the snake for what he was... and that was something.

"I think I have an idea about what I need to do," she murmured. "Even though I won't be able to convince Fennelstar, I may still be able to control Paledusk. If he knows that *I* know everything, and I threaten to tell to his secrets, he'll have to listen to me. He won't want to do anything to put his reputation at risk."

Alarm flared in Salt's expression. "You're playing with fire, Frostmask. Paledusk will be at his most dangerous when he's cornered. As soon as he feels threatened—"

"I know," Frostmask cut him off, her stomach clenching like she'd swallowed a huge, icy stone. "I'll have to be very careful. But, I can't just sit by and wait for him to slip up again. I think I've done too much waiting already. Too many other lives will be at stake if I allow him to go on like this unchecked. This at least only directly threatens me."

"But why would Paledusk believe your threat?" Pepper piped up, his tail twitching anxiously and his head tilting in confusion. "If you think that Fennelstar won't believe what we told you about how he tried to murder Salt, Paledusk would surely think that too, right? So why would he care if you told everyone?"

Frostmask shook her head.

"You're forgetting one of the other times Paledusk has broken the code; something else he doesn't want anyone knowing about. It's also the only crime I have solid proof of..." Frostmask lifted a paw to touch her chest. *"Me."*

Parting with Pepper and Salt was more emotional than Frostmask had expected. She'd only known them a day, but after their long,

deep conversations and revelations, they felt like much older friends — or true kin even. They'd been kind, even bringing her food from their den when her belly growled, and she admitted she hadn't eaten since last evening. It was kittypet food, but Salt urged her to have it instead of taking any prey from the twoleg-place.

"Twolegs do something to it, a kind of poison..." Salt had said.

Frostmask's stomach clenched. "I know. I've seen it before."

Salt's ears perked in surprise. "You have?"

"Yeah, from the rats in the Carrionplace."

"Ah. That makes sense." Salt gave a nod. "So you know how deadly it is."

But, now with a full belly giving her the energy for her trek home, it was time for Frostmask to return to ShadowClan. Her clan-mates would need her.

"You can visit whenever you want," Pepper said, surprising Frostmask with his affection when he got up and rubbed his face against hers. "If you ever need a place to stay, or if you ever want to hear more about May in... happier times. Our home is always welcome to you." Pepper then purred lightly. "Our housefolk love cats. I promise, they won't kick you out."

"Thank you," Frostmask said, her voice suddenly thick with emotion. "That's very kind. I really appreciate how much you've both helped me, despite the risk."

Frostmask's attention shifted to Salt as he lowered his head to touch his muzzle to hers. She gazed into his scarred face and his one green eye— so much like Paledusk's, but the expression in it much gentler than any she'd ever seen on her father's face.

"I'm glad I got to meet May's kin," Salt murmured. "Although, I have to admit, I'm sorry that you share my blood as well. No cat should have to suffer the fate of having Paledusk as their father."

Frostmask clenched her jaw against the rush of painful anguish that

rose in her chest.

"It's alright," she muttered. "I have kin ShadowClan. I may not share blood with them, but they are my family."

Salt pulled his head back and nodded approvingly, wrapping his tail around Pepper and shooting him an affectionate glance.

He must think the same about him.

"I'm happy to have met you both anyway," Frostmask said. "You are both good cats." She met Salt's eye. "I'm proud to call you my kin."

Pepper purred, but Salt blinked hard, breaking the connection of their gazes as he looked at his paws.

"But there is one more thing," he murmured. "I hate that I have to ask this of you, but—"

"You don't want anyone knowing you're alive?" Frostmask guessed. "You don't want me to tell anyone that I found you, or spoke to you."

Salt nodded, still avoiding her eyes.

"I understand," Frostmask said with a soft sigh. "It would be too dangerous for you if Paledusk finds out. I will keep your existence a secret."

"Thank you," Salt breathed, glancing up again at her. "I'm sorry I can't help more, but we believe in you, Frostmask."

Pepper nodded. "Best of luck."

Salt dipped his head solemnly. "But, now we should let you get back to your family in ShadowClan. May StarClan light your path."

"Goodbye," Frostmask murmured. "And, thank you both again— for everything."

Frostmask followed her scent trail away from Pepper and Salt's home, heading back in the direction of SkyClan's territory. Her

going out was slower than in. It was afternoon now, and the thunderpaths were busy with twolegs and monsters. She found herself darting from hiding spot to hiding spot and she crawled her way through the twoleg-place. But, she would have to be even more careful once she approached the Treecut-place to avoid SkyClan patrols.

The scent of SkyClan hit her much earlier than she expected— after she'd reached the thunderpaths pointed out to her by Larchtail and Mottledflame, but before she made it out of the twoleg-place. Then a flash of white fur in the shadows of a nearby alley caught in the corner of her vision.

Paledusk.

Frostmask froze where she was beneath a hedge, her gaze flying to him. He was some distance away, but his bulky, sleek white-furred figure was unmistakable. How did he know she was here? Had Larchtail or Mottledflame decided to rat her out to their deputy?

Frostmask couldn't move, panic paralyzing her every muscle. Her heart and lungs were the only parts of her that continued to work, her chest heaving and her rapid heartbeat hammering as loud as thunder against her ear fur. Just one thought echoed in her mind:

Is he here to kill me?

But, Paledusk wasn't looking in her direction. His tail swayed languidly behind him, and his ears were held at a relaxed slant, not pinned or alert. Paledusk appeared to be alone, and he was padding away from Frostmask's hiding spot, a small piece of prey dangling from his jaws. He looked every part a cat confidently traversing his own territory, not like a cat searching for her— or for anything at all.

But, Frostmask wasn't taking any risks. She stayed where she was, silently thanking the stars that she'd disguised her scent before she'd left ShadowClan, and then it'd been muddied further by traveling through these unfamiliar territories and spending time with Larchtail, Mottledflame, and the various kittypets. Even if the wind changed, he shouldn't be able to easily identify her by smell alone.

Paledusk disappeared around a corner, but Frostmask remained in her hiding spot. She crouched, watching oblivious monsters and twolegs pass by until her legs started to ache from holding her in the same position for so long. Only then did she cautiously begin to creep forward again. She wished there was some other way that she could get back to ShadowClan without passing through SkyClan territory, but she couldn't risk straying without getting hopelessly lost. Instead, she would have to use all of her skills in stalking and stealth as a ShadowClan warrior to get out of the twoleg-place and SkyClan territory safely.

Oh StarClan, please get me out of here before I run into Paledusk again!

The stars seemed to answer her plea. Frostmask found her way back to the edge of the Treecut-place and SkyClan territory, and then into the unclaimed forest that bordered ThunderClan and the twoleg-place without spotting a single other cat. She was grateful too that Mottledflame and Larchtail hadn't lingered to check on her. There was so much that she'd learned about Slatewhisker that she couldn't tell Larchtail, out of fear that it would reach Paledusk's ears. She basically couldn't tell Larchtail anything, but Frostmask also felt bad about lying to her about it. Larchtail deserved to know the truth about her parents as much as Frostmask had.

Frostmask's journey from there back to ShadowClan territory was relatively relaxing— if reflecting on the fact that her father had tried to kill his brother and now was probably the source of the threatening war between the Clans could be construed as 'relaxing.'

She made it home to ShadowClan's camp not long after sunset to find that Murmurstep was on guard duty outside the thorn barrier. Murmurstep called out a greeting, but utterly exhausted and more stressed than she'd ever been in her life, Frostmask stumbled past her friend without offering more than a tail-flick of acknowledgement. She slipped into camp and started to slink around the clearing in the shadows of the thorn barrier. She'd hoped to make it to the nursery unnoticed and find Autumnleap to unburden some of the weight of all the new secrets that she carried. But, it seemed that all her luck with stealth had run out at the twoleg-place.

"Frostmask!" Poolcloud rushed over to her, his brow furrowed. "Are you doing okay? Pineshade told me what happened. Are you feeling any better now? You look awful."

Frostmask blinked, unsurprised that in her ragged, exhausted, and stressed state she actually looked ill.

"I'm okay now. Just tired," she said, trying to side-step Poolcloud.

But then Redclaw was there, the queen glaring at her with a mixture of relief and annoyance in her green eyes.

"There you are!" she said, her tone scolding even as she brushed her cheek against Frostmask's. "I was starting to get really worried! Why in StarClan's name did you insist on spending the entire day outside of camp instead of staying here where we could check on you?! That's what having a medicine cat is *for!"*

Frostmask's ears flattened awkwardly. "I just— Well, Pineshade must have told you how sick—"

Frostmask was saved from attempting to explain anymore when Redclaw pulled back from her face, blinking thoughtfully.

"You don't feel feverish, at least. And, I don't smell sickness on you," she said.

"Yes, I'm feeling much better now," Frostmask said, relieved at Redclaw's waning concern. The sooner that she reassured her she was fine, the sooner she could get to Autumnleap. "I think it was just a bad mouse I ate or something. But, I'm doing okay now. I don't need to see Elmclaw."

Redclaw frowned slightly. "Hm. Well, you should still rest."

She nudged her towards the warriors' den with her muzzle, but Frostmask resisted, bracing her paws against the ground.

"Actually, I wanted to go to the nursery..." Frostmask said.

"Autumnleap can take care of the kits for one more night by himself," Redclaw said.

Poolcloud nodded. "Besides, you don't want to spread anything to them just in case your illness is contagious, right?"

Frostmask sighed, a part of her wanting to come clean right then and there about her not actually being sick.

"Fine, but do you mind telling Autumnleap that I'm back in camp, Poolcloud?" she asked.

"Of course," Poolcloud said.

Frostmask nodded, finally turning towards the warriors' den, and Redclaw escorted her over as if ensuring that she would actually go inside. As they padded towards it, Frostmask glanced over at the dark auburn patches of Redclaw's pelt, suddenly struck by how similar they were to that one kittypet she met— Leo.

Frostmask hesitated, licking her lips for a moment nervously.

"Um, Redclaw? This is a really random question, but I just remembered some elders at the last gathering mentioning a name that I hadn't heard before. Was there ever a cat in ShadowClan named Roseflight?"

Redclaw blinked in surprise, her gaze flying to Frostmask's face.

"Yes, there was," she said, her brow furrowing slightly. "That's strange... Why were there cats at the gathering talking about her?"

Frostmask shrugged, doing her best to look not terribly interested. She was so exhausted that the act wasn't all that hard.

"I don't know. I just overheard part of the conversation, and someone said that name. I think perhaps Clearstream had been talking to someone about it? She might have been the one who said it, but I don't remember. I'd never heard of a Roseflight, so I was just curious, that's all," Frostmask said.

Redclaw nodded, the puzzled looked on her face fading.

"Well, she died many seasons before you were even born, so I wouldn't have expected you to recognize her name," Redclaw said.

Redclaw fell silent for a moment, her green eyes turning a bit foggy.

"Roseflight was my mother, actually," Redclaw murmured. "She was a wonderful cat and a noble warrior. It's a shame that she didn't live long enough to meet Poolcloud, Pineshade, Autumnleap, or you." Redclaw's whiskers twitched a bit ruefully. "But, I supposed that's on me and Weaseltail for waiting until we were seasoned warriors before having kits."

Frostmask's paws tingled at the revelation. She knew from all the occasional gossip that she'd picked up from her seasons in ShadowClan that Redclaw and Emberflower's mother had never named a father for her kits. No cat would dare question Redclaw or Emberflower's heritage to their faces— not when their mother had plausible deniability, and especially not now that the two senior warriors had proved themselves to be loyal ShadowClan cats through and through.

But, as Frostmask had suspected when she'd met Leo, she clearly wasn't the only cat who had secrets lurking in the twoleg-place.

Do I tell her? she thought, blinking at Redclaw.

No, I can't. Not right now at least— without explaining how I know about Leo.

"I wish I could have met her too," Frostmask murmured in response instead.

Redclaw purred at that, and Frostmask nodded at her in goodnight before slipping into the warriors' den. She retreated to her nest. She at least would be able to talk to Autumnleap soon, and tell him what happened and her plan for dealing with Paledusk. But, her heart twinged that she couldn't check on Newtkit and Mistkit yet. She knew that in the one day that she was gone, nothing in the five Clans had really changed. But, the new information she'd gleaned had shifted her view of the state of the forest— it cast a much more dangerous and deadly pallor over everything. Frostmask was almost certain now that it had been Paledusk who had told WindClan about her kits' true parentage.

But, *why?* Was he just trying to push WindClan into attacking ShadowClan because of it? Regardless of his reasons, it put her kits in danger. It would be comforting to see Mistkit's and Newtkit's fluffy pelts and breathe in their warm scents, and reassure herself that they were okay, at least for now.

But, Frostmask would have to wait a little longer. After she got to speak to Autumnleap in a moment, she could return back into the nursery. Then once she curled around her kits, heard their soft purrs and finally let herself rest for the night, she'd be ready for the next day. That's when she would solidify her plan to confront Paledusk— and face everything that came with it.

But, when Frostmask lay down on her nest to wait for Autumnleap, her exhaustion returned tenfold, and before she knew it, a dark wave of sleep engulfed her.

"Hey."

Frostmask awoke to the gentle touch of a nose to her ear and a warm breath stirring her ear-fur. Her eyes flicked open, and she blinked hard a few times to drive the bleariness from her gaze. The warriors' den was still dark, but it was now full of sleeping cats, unlike when she'd entered. Autumnleap stood over her, blinking down with a mixture of apprehension and concern.

Frostmask's jaws parted in a massive yawn. A faint headache from exhaustion throbbed behind her eyes.

"What time of night is it?" she whispered.

"A little after moonhigh," Autumnleap said, also keeping his voice quiet.

Frostmask's ears flattened. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"I figured. I checked on you earlier, but you seemed so tired, I wanted to let you rest for a bit."

Frostmask bit back the urge to scowl. She knew that Autumnleap was just trying to be thoughtful, but it was urgent that she told him what she learned. She was the only cat in the forest right now who

knew the truth about Paledusk. If something happened to her... no one would be able to stop him, or even know that they should.

"We need to talk," she said, rising to her paws.

Autumnleap nodded, unsurprised. He led the way out of the den, and through the thorn tunnel into the pine forest. Safely away from the hearing range of anyone in camp, he turned back to her.

"What happened? Did you find the black-and-white kittypet?" Autumnleap asked, his brow furrowed.

Frostmask exhaled heavily. "I found him, and found out so much more. You should sit down; this will take a while."

Autumnleap nodded and sat, and then she started to explain.

"StarClan..." Autumnleap breathed once Frostmask had finished relaying everything she'd learned during her time in the twoleg-place. She'd even told him the truth about Slatewhisker— she knew she could trust him with Salt's secret, but she warned him that he could not tell anyone else that Slatewhisker was still alive.

"That's just... *Snake-dung,"* Autumnleap cursed. "That's so much worse than I thought. I mean, Paledusk has always been shady, but I couldn't imagine..."

"A cat who would try to kill his own brother?" Frostmask asked, her mouth twisting in a grimace of sour, humorless amusement. "That I'd be *related* to a cat like that?"

"Well... yeah," Autumnleap said, blinking at her with concern. "I mean, this must have been so much worse and shocking for you to find out since he's your fath—" Autumnleap's voice cut off into a gasp as he suddenly realized something. He stared at her wide-eyed. "Oh StarClan, Frostmask, you're in danger! If Paledusk could do something like this to his brother, just for wanting to leave SkyClan, there's no telling what he'd do to you if he ever thought you could threaten him! And, you *can* threaten him since you know everything! Him being your father probably means as much as fox-dung to him!"

Autumnleap sprung to his paws and started to pace, his tail swishing with agitation. "Oh StarClan, this is bad! We need to do something to protect you! We need a plan... We have to tell Sedgestar!"

"I *have* a plan," Frostmask interrupted quickly, her stomach flipping at the thought of telling Sedgestar.

She was self-aware enough to see that her time of lying to her leader may be coming to an end. If she needed to tell Sedgestar about the threat of Paledusk, she would, but she'd have to explain herself to do it. And, she couldn't right now— not like this.

Frostmask couldn't even imagine how that conversation would go at the moment.

Hey, Sedgestar. So, remember that time that you called me a traitor because my father is a SkyClan cat? Well, I decided to go against everything you told me about him and figure out who he is anyway. Then I met with him a bunch of times and let him gain my trust. Now it turns out he's actually been terrible all along, like you said. He's probably threatening ShadowClan, and now I do actually look like a traitor for meeting with him. Sorry.

Frostmask gave her ears a small, swift shake. Sedgestar would be furious. He'd probably want to exile her or worse. Frostmask could lose *everything.*

If or when she told Sedgestar the truth, it would only be after she regained some control of the situation. That was her only chance of redeeming herself and proving that she wasn't the traitor that she appeared.

"Then what is the plan?" Autumnleap asked, blinking at her with wide amber eyes.

Frostmask exhaled heavily. Although she couldn't tell Sedgestar the truth yet, things were perilous enough now that she didn't think that she and Autumnleap could manage all of it alone.

"Can you go get Poolcloud and Pineshade?" Frostmask murmured.

"It's time that they knew the truth... We need their help. I'll tell you all together."

Autumnleap's ears perked in surprise, but he nodded, quickly vanishing into the dense pine forest. It wasn't long that he returned, his littermates in tow. Both Pineshade and Poolcloud looked concerned and disgruntled about being so suddenly pulled out of their nests. Well, Pineshade seemed more disgruntled than concerned, but Frostmask knew her well enough by now to notice the uneasy slant to her ears.

"Frostmask? Are you okay? What is it?" Poolcloud asked, his brow furrowed. "Autumnleap said there is something urgent you need to talk to us about."

"I know I told you that you had to explain yourself, but couldn't it wait until tomorrow?" Pineshade added through a massive yawn. "I had just started to have this nice dream."

"Wait, 'explain yourself?'" Poolcloud echoed in bewilderment. "Frostmask needs to explain herself about what?"

Frostmask tensed. Her belly twisted like she was going to be ill as a rush of renewed worry and fear flooded through her. Now that the moment was actually upon her, her resolve had fled and her tongue felt as heavy as a boulder in her mouth— unable to form words.

Pineshade just shrugged in answer to Poolcloud. Autumnleap padded away from his siblings to stand next to Frostmask. She managed to release a tiny bit of the tension in her muscles and exhale some of her mounting panic as she felt the comforting brush of his pelt against her side.

I have to tell them. If I don't, my clan-mates will be in danger, and I could lose the whole life I made for myself in ShadowClan.

Still, a doubting thought whispered in the back of her head.

But if I do tell them, I could lose them...

As her silence drew on, Poolcloud sent a worried glance from Frostmask to Autumnleap and then back.

"Okay seriously guys, what's going on?" he demanded. "You're really starting to freak me out."

Frostmask sighed so hard, her frame trembled. She summoned her strength.

"I'm about to tell you two something that no one else but Autumnleap knows," she said in a soft voice. "It's something that I maybe should have told you all a long time ago, but I didn't because I was scared that it would change the way you'd feel about me... But it can't be kept a secret any longer."

Even Pineshade looked more worried now. She and Poolcloud exchanged a look, identical expressions of confusion in their amber eyes.

"I'm *still* scared that it will change the way you feel about me," Frostmask admitted in a low rasp, dropping her gaze down to her paws. She took a shaky breath. "If it does though, I just want you to know that how I feel about you won't ever change. You've all been the best friends I could have ever asked for, and I'll always cherish every moment we've had as friends. But, if you do start to hate me now, I can't entirely blame you for that. I *have* made stupid mistakes that may have put our Clan in danger."

Autumnleap made a soft noise of protest, draping his tail over her back. "Frostmask, you couldn't have known—"

"Wait," Frostmask murmured, cutting him off. "Let me finish telling them everything first." She lifted her gaze again, meeting Poolcloud's eyes first, then Pineshade's. "That's all I ask— that you two hear me out until the end."

She waited until Poolcloud and Pineshade both gave hesitant nods of agreement.

"Thank you," Frostmask whispered. "Let me start at the beginning."

Frostmask began with the first day that she'd arrived in ShadowClan, explaining how when she was a kit, she hadn't known anything about her father, but May had told more information than

Frostmask had been aware of to the ShadowClan patrol that rescued them. May had told them that Frostmask's father was a SkyClan cat, and he'd injured May as he'd drove her and Frostmask away from sheltering in SkyClan. Then after May had died, Sedgestar had decided to keep this information a secret from Frostmask, not wanting to divide her loyalties.

The more Frostmask talked, the easier the words became, spilling out of her like a flood that had been dammed up for too long. She kept a careful watch on Pineshade's and Poolcloud's expressions, watching their faces turn from confused to incredulous to troubled the more Frostmask's story went on. But they kept their word, and both stood in stoic silence, neither interrupting her as she spoke.

Frostmask explained how she found all this out originally when Sedgestar accused her of betraying ShadowClan for SkyClan after the battle in ShadowClan's camp. She told them about how she'd finally spoke to Paledusk, and how his story conflicted with the one their leader had told her. She described how she struggled to believe the bad things Sedgestar told her about Paledusk when he would have every motive to want her to hate her birth father.

She told them about how she and Paledusk had started meeting, how her feelings on him were so conflicted after what he'd done to Swoopstrike and Autumnleap, but that her curiosity about her blood-relatives had drove her towards him anyway.

Finally, she described the recent suspicious occurrences—Paledusk's desire for an alliance between SkyClan and ShadowClan, ThunderClan's increasing hostility, and WindClan finding out about her kits. She admitted her growing misgivings that these could be his designs. Paledusk could be working to create conflict between ThunderClan and WindClan to drive Frostmask and ShadowClan into an alliance with SkyClan. These fears had also cast doubt on Paledusk's stories about May, and the circumstances he gave of Frostmask joining ShadowClan. But, with Paledusk's word against Sedgestar's, Frostmask had no other solid proof, besides coincidence, that Paledusk could be capable of such deceit and treachery.

"That leads me to what happened yesterday," Frostmask murmured.

"I wasn't actually sick. I was gone because I went to the twoleg-place to find a kittypet, Pepper, who once knew May, Paledusk, and Paledusk's brother, Slatewhisker very well. They all were good friends for moons. And, what Pepper told me did so much more than just confirm my fears about Paledusk."

Frostmask inhaled a shaky breath. "Pepper said that Slatewhisker had become discontent with Clan life. He wanted to leave SkyClan to become a kittypet. Paledusk found this out and was so furious at the *'embarrassment'* that he murdered Slatewhisker— his own brother... If Paledusk is capable of such a horrible act, I no longer doubt that all the terrible things I heard or suspected about him are true. And, I don't doubt that he may try to kill me to stop me from telling everyone the truth and disgracing him. After all, he did the same to Slatewhisker, his brother that he spent every moment of his life with. Why would he hesitate then to hurt me, his bastard daughter?"

Poolcloud was shivering slightly now, and Pineshade's jaw was clenched so tightly, it looked like holding her words back was putting her in physical pain.

"Not to mention, if Paledusk is the one turning WindClan and ThunderClan against ShadowClan as I believe, our entire Clan may be in danger. And, especially my kits," Frostmask continued, her ears pinning against her head. "I need to get Paledusk under control. But, I need your help to do it... That is, if you still want to help me now that you know everything that I've done."

Frostmask finally finished speaking and stared at Pineshade and Poolcloud. Her heart hammered in her chest faster than the drumming feet of a startled rabbit, and her throat closed as she took in their conflicted, disturbed expressions.

"Well, *snake-dung,"* Pineshade broke the silence with an emphatic curse.

"I think we should kill him," Autumnleap burst out before she could say anything else, sinking unsheathed claws into the mossy ground.

Frostmask's stomach flipped in shock, and Poolcloud's eyes

stretched wide as well.

"What? Autumnleap!" he exclaimed.

"I'm serious," Autumnleap insisted, his face more grave than Frostmask had ever seen it. "I've been thinking about it. Paledusk is too dangerous to be kept alive. Killing him is the only way to keep everyone safe."

Pineshade shook her head. "Don't be frog-brained. Four ShadowClan warriors murdering SkyClan's deputy in cold-blood sounds like an excellent way to start a vicious war with SkyClan. We can't risk that when we already have ThunderClan and WindClan breathing down our necks. And, do you seriously think that Willowstar would be rushing to our aid?"

Frostmask nodded, relieved that Pineshade shared her thoughts on the matter. And, admittedly... it did turn her stomach a little to think about murdering Paledusk. She'd considered it once before—in her darkest moment when Sedgestar had accused her of betraying ShadowClan and finally told her the truth about her father. But, she couldn't do it then, and she didn't think she could do it now.

Well, if Paledusk was the one that attacked her or someone she loved, that was another matter. But, to hunt him down like prey? ...Even after everything Paledusk had done, Frostmask didn't have the stomach for it.

"Obviously we wouldn't murder him in plain sight," Autumnleap snapped to Pineshade. "We kill him and hide his body. SkyClan will realize that he's missing, of course, but know nothing else."

"It's still too risky," Pineshade insisted, narrowing her eye at her brother. "What if there's a witness? What if they find his corpse?"

"I'm with Pineshade on this one," Poolcloud said with a nod.

"Wait..." Frostmask broke in softly, finally finding her voice again. "So you both *do* still want to help me?"

Pineshade shot her an impatient, glowering look.

"Yes, Frostmask. Keep up," she huffed, her tail thumping rhythmically against the ground. "I mean, don't get me wrong— I'm pissed off. But, I'll save the yowling for after we rescue your sorry tail."

Poolcloud rose to his paws and padded towards Frostmask to gently bunt his large head to her shoulder.

"Everything you told us is a lot for me to take in," he admitted. "But, it's not like this has been easy for you either. You've been going through a lot too. It can't be easy learning all this about your father — a cat you thought you could trust."

"Yes," Autumnleap said, his face softening as he looked at her again. "This isn't all your fault, Frostmask. You've been manipulated by Paledusk. And, as much as I am loyal to Sedgestar, it's not like he really helped the situation either."

"What?" Pineshade cut in, her brow furrowed. "Sedgestar did nothing wrong. He didn't lie to Frostmask at all."

Frostmask cast Pineshade an incredulous look. "He didn't tell me that my father was a SkyClan cat for seasons and forced our other clan-mates who knew the truth to do the same. You wouldn't call that *'lying?'"*

Pineshade shrugged. "That's omission, not lying. I think Sedgestar made a perfectly sensible choice to not divide your loyalties. After all, once you found out the truth, exactly what he wanted to avoid, happened."

"But Paledusk—" Autumnleap argued, his brow furrowing.

"Yeah, Paledusk manipulated her, I'm not denying that," Pineshade snapped. "But, Frostmask shouldn't have ever gone to meet with Paledusk at all! It was an absolutely frog-brained decision."

"Well, I might not have cared about my father if Sedgestar hadn't lied to me for seasons and unfairly accused me of being a traitor in the first place," Frostmask growled.

Pineshade leapt to her paws, her dark pelt bristling.

"I don't get it! You have a great home in ShadowClan!" she snarled, sudden anger smoldering in her expression. "You're deputy now! You have a mate and kits! You have *us.* Why would you ever risk that?! Were we not enough?"

Frostmask swallowed thickly.

"It's not like that," she hissed, heat prickling behind her eyes. "You can't understand. You were born here. Your family is here— your mom and dad and brothers. But, for the longest time, I felt like I had nothing *real* in ShadowClan. Then I was a warrior and finally settling in. Like, maybe I could do this, that I really *did* belong. But, Sedgestar stripped it all away by calling me a traitor. It felt like all my hard work was for nothing... that he'd never trust me, no matter what I did."

Frostmask shook her head, dropping her eyes down to paws because she found she could no longer hold Pineshade's burning, hurt gaze. "I promise, I never intended to betray any of you or ShadowClan. I've always been loyal. All I wanted was to get to know my kin. I thought I'd find a cat in Paledusk who would accept me easily because we were family. But clearly, I made a terrible mistake and misjudged him. I know now that I risked everything— that I have everything to lose."

Heavy silence met the end of her speech. Frostmask felt Autumnleap press closer against her side in wordless support, and Poolcloud quietly cleared his throat.

"But, we're going to help you, Frostmask," he said. "You'll get through this."

"We should get back on topic with the plan," Pineshade added stiffly. "But, we're *not* murdering Paledusk."

"I already have a plan," Frostmask said softly, still avoiding looking at their faces. "Paledusk's reputation means everything to him. As much as he's been ruining my life, I have the opportunity to do the same to him."

"So you want to tell everyone the truth?" Autumnleap asked,

bewildered.

Frostmask shook her ears. "No. If we tell everyone the truth, Paledusk will have nothing left to lose. There's no telling what he will do then." She finally forced herself to meet her friends' eyes again. "I want to use the truth as a deterrent. I already have a planned meeting with him at the half-moon in a few days. I will meet with him then, tell him that I know everything, and threaten to tell everyone unless he leaves me and ShadowClan alone."

Horror flooded Autumnleap's expression.

"Frostmask, you can't," he said in a hoarse whisper. "He'll just kill you to keep you silent."

"He can't," Pineshade's voice suddenly cut in.

Frostmask glanced over to see her studying her evenly. Pineshade didn't seem overly pleased with her plan, but there was a grim understanding glinting in her eye.

"That's what you want our help with, right?" she asked. "We're your insurance. He kills you; we tell everyone."

Frostmask nodded, relieved that no matter how upset Pineshade was with her, she still understood her.

"Exactly," Frostmask said.

"He may still kill you anyway and hope that you're bluffing," Poolcloud muttered, his ears angled back.

Frostmask swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. "That's a risk I have to take."

Autumnleap shook his head.

"There must be a better way," he growled.

"I don't think there is," Frostmask mewed gently as she took in his tormented expression.

"Okay, you don't want to kill him. But what if you just cut off all contact with him?" Autumnleap said, almost pleading. "Don't explain anything, just never speak to him again!"

"I can't do nothing," Frostmask said adamantly. "That won't fix any of ShadowClan's problems; Paledusk will just continue to cause trouble. And, killing him in cold-blood risks making too many new problems." She blinked at Autumnleap, willing him to understand. "This way, I can at least *control* him. He will have to listen to me when I tell him to stop meddling and keep SkyClan from bothering us. I can make things better for ShadowClan and undo some of this mess I got us in."

Autumnleap searched her gaze with his own for several tense heartbeats before he finally seemed to realize that he couldn't talk her out of it. Worry and disappointment washed over his expression, but only for a moment before it was replaced with an intense determination.

"Fine," he said. "But, when you go meet Paledusk, I'm going with you."

Frostmask's ears angled back uneasily. "Your presence may just provoke him more."

"Then I'll hide in the bushes," Autumnleap said, setting his jaw stubbornly. "But, I'm not leaving you alone with him. You can't change my mind on this either. I'm going to follow you to Fourtrees no matter what you say. If he attacks you, I'll be there to help you fight him. And, I'll fight to kill."

"And, if he kills you both instead?" Pineshade asked sharply. "You'd really leave your barely more than a moon-old kits without a single parent?"

The guilt that tinged Autumnleap's expression told Frostmask that he hadn't considered that. He turned his gaze onto Pineshade and Poolcloud.

"You two would take care of them, wouldn't you?" he asked.

Poolcloud frowned. "Of course we would. But, for the record, I'd much prefer that neither of you die."

Autumnleap rumbled a brief purr, forcing a more cheerful expression.

"Obviously that's the ideal scenario," he said.

"The plan will work," Frostmask said with more confidence than she felt. She searched each of her friends' faces in turn as if by trying to convince them, she could convince herself. "Paledusk is like a snake. He flourishes in hidden crannies and long grass. But, strip away his secrets and throw him out in the open, and he's vulnerable. He'll see he's not the one in control anymore. We are."

Autumnleap, Pineshade, and Poolcloud all nodded, and sudden gratitude for their support washed through Frostmask.

"Thank you," she whispered, "for helping me."

Autumnleap touched his muzzle to her ear.

"Always," he breathed.

"Of course," Poolcloud added with a reassuring purr.

"Yeah, well... I don't want you to die," Pineshade muttered, which Frostmask knew was as close to affection as Pineshade was capable of at the moment.

Frostmask glanced at Autumnleap, and as she looked at his auburn pelt, she was reminded again of the kittypet who'd looked so much like him.

"I'm sorry for lying to you," she murmured. "But, I promise, I'll never keep secrets like any of these from you all again... So I think I should tell you about this other kittypet I met at the twoleg-place."

Autumnleap's head tilted to the side in a mixture of confusion and surprise.

"Another kittypet that knew your parents?" he asked.

Frostmask shook her head. "No. His name was Leo. He helped me find Pepper's home, but he didn't really know my parents." She turned away from Autumnleap to sweep her gaze over Poolcloud and Pineshade as well. "But, it did sound like he knew ShadowClan well. Or, he used to. He seemed older than most elders, and he asked about a ShadowClan cat named Roseflight."

"Roseflight?" Pineshade echoed, her brow furrowing slightly. "That name sounds really familiar."

"She's Redclaw's mother," Poolcloud said, blinking thoughtfully. "She's occasionally mentioned her before."

"That's right," Pineshade said, recognition dawning in her expression.

"Leo also looked a lot like Autumnleap," Frostmask added.

Autumnleap blinked hard. "Me?"

His mystified expression sent a rush of equal parts fondness and exasperation running through Frostmask.

"I suspect that Leo is your grandfather," she said, deciding to cut to the point.

Autumnleap's eyes stretched as wide as moons, while Poolcloud's ears jutted up in shock.

"We're related to a kittypet?!" Poolcloud asked.

"Leo didn't actually admit to anything," Frostmask clarified. "But, because of the resemblance and the fact that no one knows who Redclaw and Emberflower's father is... I think so."

Pineshade's nose wrinkled, troubled lines furrowing into her face.

"It's not like it changes how I see you or anything," Frostmask added hastily. "I just... in order to be totally honest, I felt like I should tell you."

She looked at Pineshade anxiously.

Have I just made her even more upset by telling her she's probably part kittypet?

After another moment of tense silence, Pineshade's expression finally smoothed, although it seemed like it took her a bit of effort. She shrugged, casting Frostmask a cool, indifferent look.

"It doesn't matter to me," she said haughtily. "It's not like any of us would ever want to leave ShadowClan to be a kittypet. And, I still hunt and fight better than half of our clan-mates— with kittypet blood and one eye and all."

"I know," Frostmask said with a brief purr.

"...Are you going to tell anyone else?" Poolcloud asked hesitantly.

Frostmask shook her head.

"It's not my information to share. You all can do what you want with it," she said, truthfully a bit relieved to free herself of the burden of at least one family's secret.

"We should probably keep it to ourselves for now," Autumnleap spoke up. "We at least can't tell anyone yet how we know about Leo."

Poolcloud and Pineshade echoed their agreement.

The conversation over, they all were finally able to head back to camp. As Poolcloud and Pineshade returned to the warriors' den, Frostmask followed Autumnleap into the nursery. Contentment and relief washed over her as she finally saw Mistkit and Newtkit.

The pair were sleeping peacefully. Mistkit's chin rested on Newtkit's shoulders, his head gently bobbing up and down with his sister's breaths. As Frostmask stepped into the nest, she was careful to avoid trodding on any of Dewleaf and Poolcloud's kits' legs or tails; they were starting to get quite gangly. Frostmask then curled herself around her kits, Autumnleap settling down beside her.

Newtkit stirred first as Frostmask's plumy tail wrapped around them.

"Hm... Mama?" she chirped, her head abruptly jerking up as she recognized her.

That sent the back of her skull careening into Mistkit's muzzle. He jerked, bleary blue eyes flying open.

"Ow *hey—!* Mama?" Mistkit said, shifting from sleepy confusion to indignation in an instant, before just as quickly transitioning to happiness as he also noticed Frostmask.

"Hello, little tadpoles," Frostmask purred quietly, lowering her muzzle to nuzzle them both.

"Where were you?!" Newtkit demanded, but she leaned into Frostmask's touch. "You were gone all day!"

"Talk quieter, or you'll wake the whole den," Autumnleap warned, but he blinked affectionately at the kits.

"Dad said you were sick," Mistkit said to Frostmask in a softer voice than his sister, concern in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I'm feeling a lot better now that I'm back with you two," Frostmask murmured.

Autumnleap purred from behind her, allowing Frostmask to feel the rumble against her back. Her heart was easing with every passing moment in the nursery.

"Okay but—" Newtkit's sentence was interrupted as her jaws split open in a massive yawn. "—you can't go away for a whole day again! Not without telling us."

Frostmask's relaxation vanished as, instead, her veins chilled as she thought of her looming meeting with Paledusk. What if Paledusk *did* kill them? What would their kits think if she and Autumnleap just disappeared and never came back on the night of the half-moon?

Oh StarClan, please let this plan work.

"Of course," Frostmask said, before hesitating as she thought that

untenable promise over. "I mean, I'll do my best... but the life of a warrior can be dangerous. I may not always come home when you expect."

"But you will come at some time, right?" Mistkit asked, his head tilting to the side like an owl.

"I'll always try," Frostmask whispered. "But, if I don't, you must be brave. You can do that for me, right? Be brave even if I'm not there?"

"Yeah," Newtkit muttered.

"We can try," Mistkit added.

"Thank you," Frostmask breathed, resting her chin on the moss next to the two of them. "My brave, little kits."

She watched them lovingly, purring as Newtkit's and Mistkit's eyelids drooped, sleepiness already overtaking them again. Only a few heartbeats later, they had all drifted off.

The few days until the half-moon passed much too quickly. After fending off Sedgestar's insistent questions about why in StarClan's name his deputy had decided to vanish into the woods for an entire day instead of going to the medicine cat like anyone reasonable, Frostmask spent the rest of her remaining time quietly. She did very little hunting and patrolling. Instead, after she organized the patrols for the day, she ended up spending as much time as possible with Mistkit and Newtkit. She played with them, groomed them, and coasted them into trying their first bites of meat— a freshly killed robin Lizardstrike proudly presented to them.

She refused to consider that these might be the last days that she spent alive with her kits. But, she did still find herself holding them more tightly to her than usual every night when they went into the nursery to sleep.

She was cradling them against her chest in that same way when the night of the half-moon came. She'd been unable to sleep a wink after the sun had went down. Hot anxiety was pulsing much too

closely beneath her skin.

Instead of indulging her increasingly fearful thoughts and spiraling into panic, Frostmask busied herself with grooming Newtkit's and Mistkit's pelts to perfection. They were soon lulled to sleep by the rhythmic rasps of her tongue. Once not a single hair on their pelts was out of place, Frostmask chose to occupy her mind by counting their breaths. She watched their round bellies rising and falling, marveling at the downy-soft grey fur of Mistkit's and the adorable little spots that speckled Newtkit's. Frostmask lost count of their breaths several times and had to start over. She was probably on her seventh or eighth attempt when Autumnleap stirred against her back. She didn't think he'd been able to sleep either, but he'd been quiet and still up until now.

"It's time," he murmured.

Frostmask nodded tightly, all of her worry surging back up. She ducked her head to breathe in Mistkit's and Newtkit's sweet, gentle scents one more time before she rose to her paws and delicately stepped over them. Autumnleap licked each of them on their head in turn, lightly enough not to wake them, before he also stood and followed her out of the den.

Frostmask took a trembling breath as she entered into the quiet camp. It felt like her heart was fracturing with each step she took away from her kits, but she couldn't let thoughts about her or Autumnleap dying and leaving them behind distract her. She would need every piece of her wits as focused and sharp as possible when she confronted Paledusk.

Frostmask closed her eyes for a moment, picturing Mistkit's soft, fluffy grey form and Newtkit's sleek tortoiseshell pelt in her mind.

I love you, she told each of them.

Then she gently pushed them aside, tucking them to the very back of her mind and out of her thoughts. Exhaling another heavy breath, Frostmask opened her eyes again to see Autumnleap watching her, his amber eyes solemn.

"Ready?" he asked softly.

"No," Frostmask admitted, but she began to walk towards the thorn tunnel anyway.

They exited camp to see Poolcloud and Pineshade sitting on the other side of the thorn barrier, as expected. Frostmask had assigned them both to guard the camp tonight so they would realize as quickly as possible if Frostmask and Autumnleap weren't going to make it back home.

For a moment, the two pairs of cats just blinked at each other. Frostmask gazed at Poolcloud first before focusing on Pineshade. Sadness prickled at Frostmask's paws. Things with Pineshade had still been tense for the past few days. They'd all spoken often, reenforcing the plan, but Pineshade had refused to talk to Frostmask about anything else beyond that. She was clearly still hurt by Frostmask's actions and secrets.

Frostmask's heart twisted at the thought of leaving things like this between them, especially if she was going to die tonight. But, she didn't know how to fix it. She was already doing all she could—she'd apologized and was now trying to undo her mess with Paledusk. Now it seemed up to Pineshade to decide when, or *if,* she wanted to offer her forgiveness.

I should just be grateful that she at least still cares about me enough to help me.

"Good luck," Poolcloud whispered, breaking the silence.

He blinked affectionately at the both of them, despite the worry that swirled in his eyes. "I have complete faith in you both. But, just in case things do go bad... you can rely on us."

Frostmask nodded, forcing a soft purr. She glanced at Pineshade again, but she was looking at Autumnleap.

"Keep her safe," Pineshade said in a gruff voice, shuffling her paws. "...And you stay safe too."

Autumnleap lifted his chin.

"No need for such hysterics, Pineshade," he said, arching a brow teasingly. "We've got this."

Frostmask nodded, waiting to see if Pineshade would say anything to her directly. But, Pineshade didn't even respond to her brother's teasing. She was quiet, gazing down at her paws. Frostmask swallowed around the disappointment that rose in her throat.

"We'll be back before dawn," she said, attempting to put on the same confident air as Autumnleap. "See you soon."

She began to turn away.

"Frostmask?" Pineshade said suddenly, stopping Frostmask in her tracks.

She glanced back to see Pineshade had lifted her amber eye and was now staring at her intently.

"I know he's your father," Pineshade said in a low tone, almost a growl. "But if he lunges, you go for the throat."

Frostmask gave a small nod, holding her friend's burning gaze.

"I will," she whispered.

A heavy silence fell over them all. With nothing left to say, Frostmask finally broke eye contact with Pineshade. She and Autumnleap padded into the woods.

Frostmask's first order of business was to make sure that Autumnleap disguised his scent so thoroughly, there was no chance of Paledusk unintentionally noticing his presence. To Autumnleap's credit, he didn't complain once as Frostmask instructed him to roll in a puddle of mud until his pelt was completely covered, and then top off the coat of mud by brushing through a patch of chervil. Once Frostmask was convinced that there was no chance of Paledusk scenting Autumnleap unless he was close enough to step on him, they continued on to Fourtrees.

The walk over there was spent in a tense silence. They had nothing to discuss that they hadn't talked about already. Now the only thing

left to do was see Paledusk's response to their plan.

Frostmask and Autumnleap said goodbye at the ShadowClan border. There was a slim chance that Paledusk could be lurking somewhere in ThunderClan's woods, so Frostmask didn't want to risk Autumnleap walking out in the open with her all the way to the slope leading down to Fourtrees.

When they paused at the mouth of ShadowClan's tunnel, Frostmask didn't hesitate to duck her head under Autumnleap's chin, regardless of the mud that clung to his pelt. Autumnleap purred reassuringly, although Frostmask wasn't sure if he was trying more to soothe her or himself. After a few long heartbeats, Frostmask finally pulled back to look at his face.

Despite the mud clumping his fur and disguising his pelt's color, his shining amber eyes were as familiar and comforting as ever. Frostmask searched his gaze, trying to draw strength from it.

"I'll be right behind you," Autumnleap said simply.

Frostmask nodded. There was nothing more to it than that. To actually say goodbye to him... It was too unthinkable.

"Don't let him know you're there," she reminded him.

With that, Frostmask slipped into the tunnel, not giving herself another moment to worry and doubt.

Each of her senses strained at their boundaries as she reached ThunderClan's territory, although it wasn't ThunderClan warriors she was worried about tonight. The wind, at least, was in her favor. It flowed from Fourtrees and buffeted against her nose. The scents didn't warn of any lurking danger ahead, and the breeze also worked to draw her and Autumnleap's scent away from where Paledusk should be coming from. As Frostmask slipped through the thick, dark undergrowth, she kept her ears pricked, trying to pick up any sounds of Autumnleap behind her, but she only heard the slight wind stirring the leaves. That either meant that Autumnleap was demonstrating an excellent feat of stealth, or he was too far behind her for her to hear him. She dearly hoped it was the former.

Finally, Frostmask reached the top of the slope that led down to the Fourtrees hollow. She had hoped that she would arrive early enough to have a chance to compose herself before Paledusk came, but she didn't have that much luck tonight. A white figure was already sitting on one of the Great Oak's roots, his bright pelt only slightly disguised by the shade cast by the tree. Frostmask's anxiety spiked, making her paw-pads damp with perspiration. Exhaling heavily, she forced her legs to carry her forward.

Frostmask didn't attempt any sort of sneaky approach; instead, she just strode out of the undergrowth, finding herself at roughly the opposite end of the hollow as Paledusk. Paledusk spotted her quickly, and rose to trot over. Frostmask felt almost like someone else was controlling her body as her paws took her to the center of the clearing to meet him. Frostmask knew that Paledusk would notice that something was wrong with her within moments. Her breaths were too quick and shallow. She was just barely keeping her paws from trembling. And, she couldn't stop staring at him.

Paledusk, as immaculately groomed and composed as ever, stood in front of her with a stainless white pelt. But, she couldn't look at him without thinking of Salt's recollection— of Paledusk snarling like a mad fox, splattered and dripping with blood. Or, without imagining Paledusk's cool indifference as he clawed May's side to drive her and Frostmask away, uncaring of the fact that his mate was already dying.

Frostmask tasted bile in the back of her throat. Pain, hatred, and even strangely, grief, flooded through her as every emotion she'd bottled up so that she could think, *could plan,* after Salt had finally told her the truth, came spilling out in the face of Paledusk.

He dipped his head to her in greeting as she reached him.

"Hello, Frostmask," he said, as civil and charming as ever. "How are you this fine evening..."

Paledusk's voice trailed off as he lifted his eyes and finally caught sight of her expression. Puzzlement flickered over his face, but calculative thoughts were already darting in his bright green eyes as he tried to piece together what was wrong— and how he could get

ahead of it.

"I need to talk to you." Frostmask's voice was a soft growl. "I found something out. Something deeply troubling."

Paledusk blinked at her, worry shining in his gaze. Could it be genuine? Was it actual worry for her? Or, just worry for himself?

"By all means, tell me," he said.

Frostmask decided not to mince words. She inhaled deeply, bracing herself.

"Slatewhisker wasn't killed by rogues, was he?" she hissed in a low tone. "*No.* What killed him was something— *someone*— much closer to home."

Paledusk's ears angled back, but his expression didn't waver.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

A knot of rage tangled inside Frostmask, the emotion spurning her on.

"I'm talking about *you,* Paledusk!" she spat, her tail lashing. "You killed Slatewhisker!"

Paledusk froze, his expression unreadable. Frostmask glared at him, waiting for the rebuttal, for the excuses, but there was nothing he could tell her that would change her mind. To Frostmask's utter amazement though, not a single word of denial slipped from Paledusk's lips.

"Whatever it is that you think you know," Paledusk said in a low voice. "I ask that you first allow me to explain."

It was so ridiculous that a burst of sound, half-growl and half-humorless laughter, was torn from Frostmask's throat.

"Explain?! What is there to explain?" she gasped. "You killed him!"

"I cared for Slatewhisker," Paledusk insisted, his jaw clenching. "He

was my only littermate and my best friend."

Frostmask's eyes stretched wide in shock. "How could you have cared for him, but also killed him?!"

Paledusk's features drew in a minuscule amount. "It was... a regrettable overreaction."

Frostmask exhaled sharply, almost choking on her incredulousness.

"A— An 'overreaction?!' That's all you have to say about murdering your brother?!" she demanded.

As Paledusk remained silent, Frostmask shook her head, her growl growing louder in her throat as her mind turned to May. "Then what would you call killing your mate by refusing to let me and her join SkyClan? Was that also just an 'overreaction?'"

If Paledusk was surprised by this additional revelation, he didn't show it on his face "May was never a Clan cat. She never wanted to be one and could never be one. I could just see that reality when she could not. My decision avoided an unnecessary confrontation with Fennelstar and my clan-mates. I avoided sentencing her to a life that she would have hated, with cats that would have never accepted her."

"So we deserved to starve to death instead?!" Frostmask snarled.

"No." Paledusk sent her a sharp look. "You are not May, Frostmask. Another regret of mine is that I did not bring *you* to SkyClan. You are my flesh-and-blood, far more than my *brother* ever was. Slatewhisker abandoned me and his Clan. Yes, I wish I had tried harder to convince him to stay instead of losing control, but the fact remains that he was a traitor. *You,* though, understand loyalty. Even with my mistake of not taking you to SkyClan, look at all we've managed to accomplish. We can continue to accomplish so much more." Paledusk's eyes rounded, a fervent glimmer appearing in their bright green depths as he entreated her to understand. "Now with no more secrets between us, we will truly be able to work together. Side-by-side, we can rule these clans. We can establish a legacy— a *dynasty*— that will last for generations."

Frostmask's lip quivered, and sudden heat prickled against her eyes.

"You don't understand," she said thickly. "You don't really know anything, do you? You don't know me. We've spoken for so many moons, but I'm not sure if you ever had any idea who I actually *am,* or what *I* want. You never even cared to ask." Frostmask set her jaw, fury building in her chest to replace the brief stab of sorrow. "All you've ever done is use me to further your own goals. Don't think I don't see what you're doing with ThunderClan and WindClan, trying to force ShadowClan into an alliance with SkyClan. And, *for what?* Just for land and power? To kill all of ThunderClan?"

Paledusk blinked at her. "You're a smart cat, Frostmask. Think about it. You must be able to see that is not room in the forest for both ThunderClan and SkyClan. ThunderClan must be dissolved. That so-called 'clan' should have never even existed in the first place! Thunderstar was Skystar's son. He should have ruled SkyClan after his father, not founded a pointless fifth clan. But, we can do what they could not." Paledusk held her gaze, that fervent spark still burning in his eyes. "I am not a monster. If some former ThunderClan cats prove themselves worthy, they can join SkyClan after ThunderClan is gone. Then only SkyClan will remain, as how it always should have been."

Paledusk leaned slightly towards her, his voice dropped to an intent whisper. "Then once you and I are the leaders of SkyClan and ShadowClan, we will be powerful enough to usher in a new era for the forest. We will shape the clans in our image. I do care for you, Frostmask. All that I've wanted has been to use our power for the good of us both."

Frostmask's stomach clenched in shock. Paledusk's delusions of grandeur were even more frightening and grandiose than she could have ever suspected.

"...You 'care' for me?" she hissed from between her fangs. "Like how you *cared* for Slatewhisker? I don't think you even know the meaning of the word. If you did actually care about me, or know me at all, you'd know that I'd never want to rule the forest! And, I'd rather *die* than betray my clan-mates by working with you."

Paledusk's eyes narrowed, a dangerous glimmer appearing in their depths, but Frostmask continued before he could speak.

"You're the reason my mother is dead. You're the reason Swoopstrike is dead." Frostmask's voice broke over the words as emotion welled up in her throat and threatened to choke her. "You even killed your own brother." Frostmask shook her head, the heat of her rage dimming to be replaced by just an aching hollowness. "You can try to justify all of those things to me, or to yourself, or to anyone, but I know the truth now. You're just selfish. You're a poison. You strangle the life out of everything good that you touch. But, I won't let you take anything or anyone else from me."

Frostmask lifted her chin, meeting Paledusk's now unreadable eyes and steeling herself.

"You will never speak to me again, and for as long as you live, you will ensure that SkyClan will never raise a single claw against ShadowClan," she growled. "As a show of good-will, I will do the same, keeping peace between our two Clans. You will also stop whatever trouble you are causing between us and ThunderClan and WindClan— I *know* you must be the one behind all that. In response, I will stay quiet about you. But, if you don't do those things, I will tell the whole forest your secrets until they all know exactly who you really are, and what you've done. They will know about Slatewhisker. They will know about May. They will know about *me."*

"You will only turn your own clan-mates against you if you tell them you are half-SkyClan," Paledusk growled.

"I don't care!" Frostmask spat, digging her claws into the ground. "Some of my clan-mates might hate me, yes. But, *I* didn't chose to be born. You're the one that broke the code. You're the one who will suffer more. In fact, I've already told some cats the truth— all of it. And, if I don't return to my camp in one piece tonight, they will tell the whole forest for me. "

For a moment, Frostmask's threat hung in the air between them. Paledusk was silent as he stared at her, and Frostmask stiffened, fearing that Paledusk may take this rejection from her as poorly as

he took the rejection from his brother. But, then Paledusk broke the connection of their gazes, dipping his head.

"Fine. If that is what you wish, I will leave. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

Paledusk turned, and with one swish of his sleek, white tail, he vanished into the undergrowth.

Flesh of my Flesh

The days following Frostmask's confrontation with Paledusk were quiet. She hunted, patrolled, and spent time with Newtkit, Mistkit, Autumnleap, and her friends. Even Pineshade was speaking to her again, but they avoided the topic of Paledusk entirely. He was a dark cloud looming above them, threatening to unleash torrents, and lightning, and thunder, and yet they just refused to acknowledge his presence.

But, as the days passed and the storm remained at bay, Frostmask began to cautiously hope that her plan had worked. Maybe she really had put Paledusk in his place, and he would not bother them again.

Frostmask found herself sitting at the top of a small rise. Long, green-leaf grass swayed on the hill in front of her, and a massive, majestic pine tree towered at her back. Its dark trunk stretched straight and high, verdant needles bristling proudly up towards the sky. Frostmask lounged in the shade of her tree to escape the heat of the sun, and her eyes half-closed as she relaxed.

The sound of paw-steps stirred her from her near drowsing state. Frostmask's gaze flickered open, and she glanced over to see a reflection of herself standing at her side. Frostmask jerked, her eyes stretching wide in confusion, but as the soothing scent of the she-cat wreathed over her, recognition flared in an instant.

"Mama," Frostmask breathed.

The grey-point queen purred, and Frostmask leapt to her paws, burying her face in May's long, creamy chest fur. Joy spread through every inch of her.

"I've missed you so much," Frostmask murmured into her mother's pelt.

"I've missed you too," May replied.

Her voice was somehow both faded in Frostmask's memory, but also as familiar to her as Frostmask's own pelt. Frostmask pulled her head back to study May's face. A deep feeling of comfort settled over her, as soft as falling snow. It'd been *so* long since she'd last seen her.

Some of Frostmask's happiness dimmed as confusion appeared again.

...Why *hadn't* she seen her?

"Where have you been?" Frostmask asked.

May didn't reply. She only stared back at her, sorrow beginning to creep into her blue eyes, and in flashes, Frostmask remembered.

The hunger, the horrible ice, their long march, finding ShadowClan, finding Redclaw, then Autumnleap, then her mentor, her friends, and her kits, and her father— Paledusk. *Paledusk.*

Frostmask stilled. Yes, that was the last thing she remembered, learning all those horrible things about Paledusk and then confronting him.

I must be dreaming. May is dead.

Despite this revelation, Frostmask felt strangely calm as her gaze refocused on her mother. May stared at her, grief entering her expression like she'd also seen all the worst of the memories that had surged through Frostmask's mind.

"Everything that you've suffered is my fault," May whispered. "I should have see it before. I shouldn't have left you alone to deal with *him."*

Frostmask shook her head. "You couldn't have known. Paledusk was too good. He almost got me too."

"Still, I'm sorry," May murmured. "Can you forgive me?"

Frostmask fell quiet. If May had lived, she might have never joined ShadowClan, met her mate, or any of her friends, or adopted her

kits... Her path had never been an easy one, but the alternative was unimaginable. It was too painful. Even just the thought of leaving behind all she had now, broke her heart.

"There's nothing to forgive," Frostmask told May simply. "I'll always miss you, but I wouldn't change the life I was given. I'm... I'm happy here."

May began to purr again, most of the sadness slipping from her face.

"I'm glad," she murmured. "All I want is for you to be happy, baby."

May leaned forward once more, this time to press her cheek to Frostmask's.

"But, I'm sorry to say that it's not over yet," May whispered, her breath stirring Frostmask's ear fur. "Frost, you must wake up."

A cold rush of anxiety flooded through Frostmask's body as she tugged away from May to stare at her mother's face desperately.

"What—?"

Frostmask didn't get the chance to finish her question. The sky above was cloudless, but a thundering *crack* like a bolt of lightning pierced her ears, drowning out the rest of her words. A shadow of motion flashed in the corner of Frostmask's eyes. She leapt back as the massive pine next to her fell, crashing to the ground right between her and her mother with an earth-shattering slam. The thick branches trembled from the impact, needles drifting to the ground. Stunned, Frostmask stared at the dense tangle of needles and sticks.

"May?" Frostmask gasped. *"May?!"*

She sprung forward, shoving her way through the branches, her eyes flying frantically to search for any scrap of white or grey fur. When she finally made it to the pine's wide trunk, she placed a paw on the tree to scramble over it, but Frostmask recoiled when the bark crumbled under her touch. Staring down at her paw in shock, Frostmask shook off the pieces of sticky black debris. Despite how

magnificent the pine had looked, the heart of the tree was dark and spongy. The sickly scent of decay stuck in the back of her throat.

"Wake up, Frostmask," May's whispered voice urged again in her ears— although Frostmask still couldn't spot any trace of her mother. "Wake up."

Frostmask's eyes flew open, a quiet gasp tearing from her throat. She jerked her head up from the ground and glanced around, her gaze flickering across the camp. It was late morning, and several warriors lazed around camp as they returned from their dawn hunts and patrols. Poolcloud and Dewleaf were playing moss-ball with their four kits on the other side of camp. Pineshade was sharing tongues with Murmurstep, while Lizardstrike and Cedarfur lounged nearby. It was a hot, humid day. Not a single breeze stirred the forest, leaving the dense moisture to rise as tentacles of mist from the marsh and curl around the pines, their milky tendrils even stretching into camp. All seemed peaceful— no cat looked very interested in doing much more than necessary on such an oppressively warm day.

Frostmask's gaze focused on Newtkit and Mistkit as they tumbled together a few tail-lengths in front of her. Her sleep-addled mind recalled that she'd been watching them play in front of the nursery. The heat must had lulled her into a nap.

"Are you okay?" Autumnleap asked, shifting against her side.

She glanced over at him, taking in his worried expression. Frostmask's belly squirmed uneasily. Should she tell Autumnleap what she'd just dreamed about?

What even *was* that dream? It had felt so real. Could Frostmask have somehow actually made contact with her mother's spirit? Or, had it only been her imagination— unusually vivid, but ultimately ordinary?

"I'm not sure..." Frostmask spoke slowly. "I just have this feeling like something bad is about to happen."

Autumnleap blinked in slight concern, but he gave a reassuring

purr, draping his dark auburn tail over her flank.

"Well nothing bad is happening right now," he said, nodding towards their wrestling kits. "Unless you're talking about this devastating fox attack."

Frostmask focused her attention back onto Mistkit and Newtkit. The 'fox,' Newtkit, was growling and snapping menacingly as Mistkit, the noble ShadowClan warrior, attempted to drive her away from the nursery.

"I'm gonna eat all the kits!" Newtkit threatened, curling her lips back in her best intimidating snarl.

"ShadowClan will never let you, fox!" Mistkit squeaked, his fluffy grey tail lashing. "Attack!"

Mistkit hopped towards Newtkit, puffed up and spitting. Unintimidated by her brother's postering, Newtkit darted in, tackling him. The pair went tumbling across the ground, squeaking and purring.

Frostmask relaxed, her own purr rising in her throat. She leaned back against Autumnleap's shoulder with a sigh.

"You're right. It's probably nothing," she said.

Content silence fell over them as they watched their kits. But, then only a moment later, Frostmask stiffened, her ears jerking up at the sound of rapidly approaching paw-steps.

Because of the windless day, the scent of ThunderClan only wafted over to her when the paw-steps had nearly reached the thorn barrier. Frostmask just had the chance to spring to her feet, a growl of alarm rising in her throat when a dark figure burst into camp, his chest heaving with pants.

Frostmask grew quiet as she recognized Dampfang. His fur was messy and a bit bloodied, and the strong scent of ThunderClan clung to his pelt.

"Dampfang!" Larkfoot called, rushing over to her son with Darkpelt

just a footfall behind her. "What's wrong?!"

Dampfang gulped in huge breaths of air, still panting too hard to respond. Frostmask glanced over her shoulder, relieved to see Autumnleap was already rushing Mistkit and Newtkit into the nursery. Sedgestar was out of camp on a border patrol, which meant the authority in camp fell to her. Her belly cramped with stress, but she still quickly strode over to Dampfang, Autumnleap joining her just a moment later once their kits were safely tucked away. Several other clan-mates were starting to cluster around Dampfang now too, their eyes wide and anxious.

"ThunderClan—!" Dampfang gasped between pants, his green eyes wide but bright with fury. "By the thunderpath near Fourtrees—! ThunderClan and WindClan— attacking!"

Frostmask's ears pinned back, stunned for a moment. More cats were getting to their paws, and Thornheart and Cricketsong emerged from the warriors' den, blinking sleepily.

"What?" Frostmask demanded, sinking unsheathed claws into the ground.

Dampfang's gaze flew to her, the anger in them mounting as he grew impatient.

"They ambushed our patrol!" he snarled, finally catching his breath. "We're badly outnumbered; Sedgestar needs reinforcements!"

Frostmask blinked hard, recalling that Dampfang had gone with their leader's group. A jolt of fear pierced through her.

Are they targeting Sedgestar deliberately?

ThunderClan didn't know that it was likely Paledusk who'd been manufacturing the scents in their territory, trying to create conflict between their Clans. Frostmask had thought that getting Paledusk under control would avert any conflict with ThunderClan, but clearly tensions had already reached a breaking point if they'd allied with WindClan against ShadowClan.

Is this all my fault? I should have said something earlier and stopped

this!

"R-right. I—" Frostmask began, stammering slightly.

"Cedarfur, Murmurstep, Thornheart, Cricketsong, Pineshade, Autumnleap!" Dampfang yowled, drowning out her words. "Follow me!"

Frostmask stiffened at Dampfang issuing commands over her, but this wasn't the time to scold him for insubordination. Shaking off her anger, she moved to follow Dampfang as he whirled back towards the thorn tunnel.

"Not you," Dampfang hissed over his shoulder at her. "Sedgestar's orders. You stay and defend the camp."

Frostmask froze. Sedgestar wanted her to stay behind? But, she was no help here to her leader!

Frostmask didn't even get the chance to protest, though. Dampfang had already charged back out the thorn tunnel, not even waiting for his reinforcements to run back with him. The cats he'd called were all still stumbling to their paws and rushing towards the barrier after him.

Frostmask's gaze quickly scanned the camp. As the reinforcements started to leave, she realized that she, Lizardstrike, Dewleaf, and Poolcloud would be the only warriors left in camp. But, thank StarClan that Larkfoot and Darkpelt were here too— the pair were still plenty formidable despite their current roles as a permanent queen and an elder. Elmclaw fought well too, even though he disliked it.

Autumnleap turned to Frostmask.

"I better go," he breathed, brushing his muzzle briefly against her ear. "I'll be back before you know it."

Frostmask nodded, her throat too tight with anxiety to respond. The attack was so sudden, and there were so few cats left in camp now... The rest of the Clan was still out patrolling in various parts of the territory or rushing after Dampfang to fight. Frostmask prayed that

the ThunderClan and WindClan warriors wouldn't attempt to attack their camp. Would her kits be safe if they did?

Autumnleap's thoughts must have followed the same path as hers, his attention turning to the nursery.

"You coming?" Pineshade called to him from the thorn tunnel.

"I'll be right behind you!" Autumnleap yowled back.

Pineshade nodded. Her dark-furred tail vanished out of camp as all the other reinforcements beside Autumnleap left. While Poolcloud and Dewleaf gathered up Mudkit, Lichenkit, Sprucekit, and Fogkit and herded them towards the den, Autumnleap ducked inside before them to check on their kits once more. Frostmask glanced around, trying to figure out how to best organize the cats left in camp when a distressed yowl froze her.

Immediately recognizing the voice, Frostmask whipped around just as Autumnleap burst from the nursery, his amber eyes round and wild.

"Have you seen Mistkit and Newtkit?!" Autumnleap demand to Poolcloud and Dewleaf.

Both Dewleaf and Poolcloud went wide-eyed, and icy fear gripped Frostmask's heart.

"They aren't in there?" she gasped as she hared over to him.

Autumnleap's worried gaze flashed to her.

"No!" he said, a faint wail entering his voice. "I know I had them go inside but—"

Frostmask darted into the nursery before he could finish, her gaze desperately scanning the dim interior of the den.

It was empty.

She'd been certain she'd seen the kits go in when Autumnleap told them to, but she was equally as certain that she hadn't seen them

sneak back out into the clearing.

The thorn bush that formed the nursery grew right out of the thorn barrier that encircled the camp itself. The barrier here was so many tail-lengths thick, though, Frostmask had never dreamed that a kit would be able to get through it and out of camp. But, as Frostmask's frantic eyes swept over the den, she spotted in the very back of the den— a tiny hole in the bush right above the ground. It certainly wasn't big enough for an adult cat to squeeze through, but a young kit...

Frostmask's chest tightened with panic. Had that *always* been there?! How could she have missed it?

Frostmask pressed her cheek to the ground to peer through the gap. Through the tangle of thorny branches, she caught a glimpse of the outside of the camp. Her gaze flashed to a small clump of grey fur hanging from a thorn, but besides that, there was no sign of the kits.

"Did you find them?" Poolcloud's voice asked from behind her. "Dewleaf and Autumnleap are checking the other dens—"

Frostmask abruptly straightened.

"They won't be there," she hissed. "They got out of camp!"

"What?!" Poolcloud gasped disbelievingly.

Frostmask pushed past him, not bothering to explain anymore as she ran through the camp and towards the thorn tunnel. Her thoughts were racing.

What could have possessed them to sneak out?!

It had only been a quarter moon or so ago that Newtkit and Mistkit had been too petrified to even leave the nursery. But now they'd left the camp entirely? And, in the middle of a battle, no less?!

Frostmask burst out of the tunnel, turning sharply to circle the thorn barrier. She could only hope that her kits would still be huddled right outside the barrier. They were still so young— not

even two moons old— and they hadn't been missing long. They couldn't have gotten far.

Frostmask heard the sound of paw-steps behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see Autumnleap, Poolcloud, and Lizardstrike following to help. News of her missing kits must have swept through the remaining cats in the camp.

Frostmask turned her attention back to scanning the barrier, searching for the location where the kits had gotten out. She slowed, her heart dropping down to her paws as she spotted it.

Although the hole had looked small from inside the nursery, from the outside, it was gaping. Tendrils and branches of thorns lay scattered across the ground, ripped from the barrier and tossed aside. This wasn't the work of a kit.

"Something got them," Frostmask gasped, panic threatening to strangle her voice. "Something came in from the outside."

Autumnleap's jaw was clenched, his claws unsheathed and gripping the ground as he vibrated with what looked to be a mixture of wrath and terror.

Lizardstrike lifted his muzzle. His mouth parted as he breathed in, blue eyes dark with concentration as he teased apart cat scents from the sticky, humid air.

'ThunderClan,' he signed. 'WindClan.'

Frostmask could smell it too, albeit faintly. The scents were weak, drowned out by the fog and moisture in the air. Autumnleap's desperate gaze sought out hers.

"We have to go after them!" he said.

Frostmask nodded hard. Autumnleap might have been summoned by Dampfang to help Sedgestar's patrol, but the safety of Mistkit and Newtkit took priority. Their kits were helpless!

Did ThunderClan and WindClan really take them? What do they even want with them?!

Frostmask felt bile rise in her throat like she might be ill, but she shoved the sensation away. She had to stay focused. Her kits needed her.

"I'll go tell Dewleaf where we're going," Poolcloud said, turning back to camp.

"No," Frostmask spoke quickly, making a snap decision. "You should stay in camp. Help her protect your own kits."

Poolcloud's ears twisted back. "But—"

"There aren't that many warriors left in camp. The remaining kits and elders need defending," Frostmask urged him. "Autumnleap, Lizardstrike and I can handle whoever stole the kits. It couldn't have been that many cats. Otherwise, we would have heard them doing it, or their scent would be stronger."

Frostmask looked at Poolcloud wide-eyed, entreating him to understand. They didn't have the time to argue. Every passing heartbeat was another moment that her kits drew farther from their camp and deeper into danger.

Poolcloud dipped his head. "Alright. I'll tell the camp."

"And, tell Darkpelt that he is in charge until Sedgestar or I am back," Frostmask said, already turning back to Lizardstrike.

'Find them,' she pleaded.

Lizardstrike gave a curt nod, lowering his muzzle to the ground. After only a heartbeat of sniffing, he took off, and Autumnleap and Frostmask wordlessly streaked after him.

As they ran through the fog, dodging around trees and splashing through puddles, Frostmask was immensely grateful that Lizardstrike was here. He was the best tracker in their clan. Despite the moisture in the air, dampening all scents, Lizardstrike seemed to have an uncanny ability to find the trail. Alone, Frostmask would be moving slowly, having to stop every so often to pick the scent again. But, Lizardstrike hardly faltered or hesitated.

Frostmask quickly noticed that Lizardstrike was guiding them in a different direction than to the battle near Fourtrees. But, they weren't headed for the borders either. In fact, it was the opposite... They appeared to be traveling deeper into ShadowClan territory.

But, why would ThunderClan and WindClan take the kits here?

It didn't make any sense, but Lizardstrike was still moving confidently, his attention focused on nothing but tracking the scent. Even Frostmask could smell it more strongly now. From the muddled ThunderClan and WindClan scent, she was able to pick out Mistkit's and Newtkit's warm, milky-nursery smell too. She silently thanked StarClan that there was no blood scent accompanying it.

Yet, a dark thought whispered.

A rush of fear fluttered inside Frostmask, but she shook her ears fiercely, trying to banish the emotion from her mind. She instead took shelter in the anger smoldering in her chest, stoking the embers into flames of fury.

Frostmask clenched her jaw until her fangs ached.

She would save her kits, and then *shred* the ones that had stolen them. There wouldn't even be enough scraps of those cats left to feed the crows.

Frostmask blinked as a looming shape emerged through the mist, her mind taking a moment to recognized the tall, long barrier as the fence that encircled the Carrionplace. It had been moons since she'd last been here. ShadowClan had avoided this area of their territory ever since leaf-bare, after the outbreak of twoleg poison from the rats.

Lizardstrike slowed near the woven, silver web of the fence, nodding towards a small tear in the material.

'The scent goes inside.'

Frostmask swallowed hard before opening her mouth to drink in the air. There was the pervasive, foul reek of twoleg trash and a hint of rat, but also the unmistakable scent of her kits.

"In there?" Autumnleap hissed. "What in StarClan's name is going on?"

Frostmask echoed Autumnleap's questions, but they didn't have time to dwell on them now. No matter how strange this was, their kits were in even more danger if their kidnappers had brought them inside the Carrionplace.

Frostmask nodded to Lizardstrike. *'Go.'*

He led the way into the Carrionplace, Autumnleap just behind. Ignoring the shudder of horror that passed through her pelt as she remembered the last time she'd been here, Frostmask followed them. They moved as silently as owls as they crept through the Carrionplace, slipping around the massive piles of twoleg trash. Frostmask kept her ears pricked for the telltale squeals of rats, but the area was eerily quiet. There wasn't even the rustling of the rodents' tiny paws through the trash.

Finally, a squeak did reach Frostmask's ears, but the noise didn't come from a rat.

Worry jolted through Frostmask like lightning.

Mistkit!

She surged forward, her lips curling back in a snarl of equal parts terror and rage. Frostmask raced ahead of Lizardstrike and Autumnleap, whipping around a corner of twoleg junk, but the sight that greeted her sent Frostmask skidding to a stop.

A misty figure had materialized from out of the fog. Paledusk stood on a slope ahead, his sleek, pristine-white pelt clashing with the piles of garbage surrounding them. His face was expressionless as he leveled his bright green gaze at her.

Frostmask's mind struggled to comprehend his presence. The faint scent of WindClan and ThunderClan still drifted around her, but there was no sign of any other warrior. Frostmask continued to stare at Paledusk in shock before a flicker of movement near his paws caught her attention. Frostmask's heart lurched as she spotted

Mistkit and Newtkit crouched and trembling among the pieces of trash. Their confused and frightened eyes, still a murky kitten-blue, found her.

"Mama!" Newtkit cried, starting to step forward, but Paledusk's paw came down on her tail, trapping her next to him.

Newtkit squeaked, and Mistkit flinched, too scared to try to escape himself. Frostmask's heartbeat thundered in her ears, pure fear shooting through her bloodstream as she stared at her kits.

"Hurt one hair on their pelts, and I'll kill you!" Autumnleap snarled, taking a few stiff-legged strides towards Paledusk as Lizardstrike stalked forward, growling from Frostmask's other side.

Paledusk swept an uninterested gaze over the group of them, his eyes coming to a rest at some point just behind the patrol.

"There are three cats here, when I said to just bring Frostmask. Don't you know how to count?" he growled.

"They won't be a problem."

Frostmask's blood ran cold at the sudden, familiar voice. Although she could hardly bear to tear her eyes away from her kits, the shock of it sent her gaze flashing towards the sound, and a dark shape prowled out of one of the piles of twoleg junk.

Dampfang stared at their group, his eyes narrowing with hatred.

"The ginger one is her pathetic mate. And, the white one is deaf. They'll be easy to deal with," he spat.

Frostmask's mind whirled in confusion, the muddled scent of ThunderClan, WindClan, and now her clan-mate in her muzzle as Dampfang stalked forward.

"Dampfang?!" Autumnleap's incredulous mew snapped Frostmask from her shock. "What are you doing here?!"

"Something I should have done long ago," Dampfang growled, answering Autumnleap but his gaze was unwavering from

Frostmask.

"Why... Why are you working with Paledusk?" Frostmask hissed, finally managing to find her voice. "You've betrayed your clan!"

Dampfang's eyes widened with outrage.

"No, I'm *saving* ShadowClan!" he spat. "From you and your mixed-breed filth. Sedgestar is weak. He should have never let a cat like you become deputy, but I won't let you bring ShadowClan to ruin. Some cat had to do something!"

Frostmask clenched her jaw, her unsheathed claws tightening against the muddy ground.

"You don't understand," Frostmask growled between her fangs. "You can't trust Paledusk. Whatever he promised you for helping him, you won't ever see a whisker of it! He's just using you!"

"'Using me?'" Dampfang released an incredulous bark of laughter. "No, Frostmask. You're the one that doesn't understand. Paledusk promised me *nothing*. He didn't have to. Our interests are aligned."

Dampfang prowled closer to her, baring his fangs.

"The only thing that I care about is that *you're gone!"* he snarled.

A tiny movement in Frostmask's peripheral vision caught her attention. She angled her eyes over to see Autumnleap staring directly at her.

"And, if you don't want your kits harmed, you will surrender," Dampfang continued.

Autumnleap blinked at Frostmask meaningfully, and one of his forepaws curled in towards him. Frostmask's ears pricked. He was trying to be subtle so the paw-sign was messy, but she still understood.

'You. Kits.'

"Then you whole lot will leave ShadowClan territory for good,"

Dampfang said.

Paledusk had so far been quiet throughout Dampfang's orders. Frostmask shot a quick glance back at him to see him staring at Dampfang with an unreadable expression. She wondered if Dampfang genuinely believed that Paledusk would ever let her and the others live in exile.

No. We know far too much now, and there is only one way Paledusk can ensure our silence.

Frostmask shifted her attention back to Autumnleap. His gaze dropped to the ground at his feet, his lip curling up to indicate 'enemy.'

'Me. Paledusk.'

"If I ever see any of you on ShadowClan territory again, I won't be as merciful," Dampfang concluded with a growl.

Autumnleap stomped his paw defiantly and raised his chin, drawing everyone's attention.

"I understand your hatred for me and Frostmask, Dampfang," Autumnleap said. "But, what has Lizardstrike done? He's a loyal ShadowClan cat."

Autumnleap blinked at Lizardstrike as he spoke, before his tail twitched in the sign for 'clan-mate.'

'You. Dampfang.'

Lizardstrike's blue eyes widened slightly before his ears flicked in acknowledgment.

"Lizardstrike is a *liability,"* Dampfang spat. "He will leave with you, or not at all."

"Give me my kits first," Frostmask ground out between her fangs. "Then we will leave."

"No," Paledusk finally addressed her, his voice a low rumble.

Frostmask's eyes flew back to her father. He fixed his cold green gaze on her.

"You three will walk ahead of us. Dampfang and I will walk behind and carry the kits," Paledusk said.

Frostmask's neck fur spiked. There was no way she was letting them get their fangs into her kittens' scruffs and so close to their throats.

But that means we need to act now.

Frostmask glanced towards Autumnleap and Lizardstrike, praying that they were ready. Autumnleap was staring at her intently, but Lizardstrike's gaze darted from her and Autumnleap to the others, his tail swishing anxiously. He had none of the context Frostmask and Autumnleap did about Paledusk, and she didn't know how much he'd been able to understand of this conversation from lip-reading alone. She could only hope that Lizardstrike trusted her enough to fight alongside her when she told him— and not hold back against Dampfang.

Frostmask slowly straightened her bristling tail, holding it out stiff behind her. From the corner of her eye, she saw the muscles under Autumnleap's pelt bunch and tighten as he readied himself. Dampfang turned his back to them and started padding towards Paledusk.

Newtkit and Mistkit shrunk back from both Dampfang and Paledusk as Dampfang approached.

Rage boiled in Frostmask's blood. She wanted to leap forward that exact moment and rip Dampfang's pelt off for what he'd done to those poor kits that trusted him. But, Frostmask held her position, waiting until Paledusk's eyes finally flickered away from her and to Dampfang, giving them a precious extra moment to act.

Frostmask's tail swept down in a sharp arc.

'Attack!'

She surged towards her cowering kits without waiting to see if Autumnleap and Lizardstrike had followed. Paledusk's gaze snapped

to her as Frostmask raced up the slope towards him. He began to pivot, and Frostmask's heart clenched. He was so much closer to her kits than she was. But, then a ginger blur rocketed across the edge of Frostmask's vision. Autumnleap, moving faster than Frostmask had ever seen him before, out-stripped her to spring onto Paledusk's hindquarters before he could reach their kits. His sudden weight bowled Paledusk over, and the two of them went tumbling in a white and ginger whirlwind of claws and furious shrieks.

Fear flooded Frostmask's system, but she didn't have the time to worry about Autumnleap or Lizardstrike. She had to focus on her kits. Frostmask reached them with a gasp, scooping up Mistkit in her jaws and yanking Newtkit against her belly with a forepaw. Her desperate eyes flashed around.

Lizardstrike was fighting Dampfang now, and Paledusk was still occupied with Autumnleap. But, there was no chance she and the kits could escape them if they ran. She could only carry one kit at a time— they'd be too slow. Dampfang or Paledusk would get free and catch them. But, she needed to get her kits someplace safer than this. She couldn't fight if they were in danger.

Frostmask's gaze found a narrow gap in a pile of twoleg trash. There was a cleft in some sort of large twoleg object— too small for an adult cat to fit inside, but not too small for her kits.

Shoving Newtkit forward, Frostmask bounded towards the cleft. She dropped Mistkit in front of it and turned back to grab Newtkit and do the same.

"Get in," she hissed to them. "Stay quiet, and don't come out until I tell you!"

The wide-eyed, trembling kits wiggled into the gap, and Frostmask's heart sank as she saw it wasn't as deep as she'd hoped. An adult cat couldn't fit in after them, but Newtkit and Mistkit could still be fished out with a paw.

Then Autumnleap let out a pained yowl from behind her, and Frostmask knew she didn't have the time to try to find a better place. Frostmask hastily scraped up a few pawfuls of trash to pile in

front of the gap, hiding it. Something sharp cut her pad. She hissed but didn't stop until her kits were mostly obscured. Praying that Paledusk and Dampfang were both too busy fighting to have noticed the kits' hiding spot, Frostmask again whirled around to face the battling warriors.

Autumnleap and Paledusk had broken apart and were now circling each other warily. Autumnleap held a wounded hindleg off the ground. Blood dripped from Paledusk's bared fangs, but his flanks were also a mess of scratches from Autumnleap's attack. Frostmask's gaze flashed to Dampfang. He was struggling to pin a squirming Lizardstrike, growling with frustration as Lizardstrike tried every trick to free himself. Despite Lizardstrike's valiant efforts, though, Dampfang's powerful muscles rippled under his pelt, and Frostmask knew he'd soon wrestle Lizardstrike into submission.

For a moment, utter dread filled Frostmask's body from her nose to the tip of her tail. Paledusk and Dampfang were two of the best fighters in all of the clans. How could they beat them?

But if we don't fight, we all die.

Summoning her strength, Frostmask charged towards Dampfang. Lashing out a paw, she raked her claws down his side, drawing blood. Dampfang's head jerked towards her, and taking advantage of his surprise, Lizardstrike finally wiggled free. Ignoring Lizardstrike completely now, Dampfang whipped towards Frostmask with a snarl, his paws flashing towards her head in a flurry of punishing blows. Frostmask could do nothing but dodge back, wincing as she wasn't quite fast enough and Dampfang scored his claws down her forehead.

The painful sting was immediate, as was the drip of blood down into her eyes. But it was only a grazing blow. Frostmask shook the red from her vision. Dampfang lunged for her but was yanked back as Lizardstrike sank his fangs into his tail.

With a snarl of frustration, Dampfang ripped his tail from Lizardstrike's jaws as if he didn't even feel the pain of his fur being torn out and leapt at Frostmask. She darted away, but not quickly enough. Dampfang's claws dug into her flanks. Frostmask hissed,

pain scoring down her sides as Dampfang pulled her to the ground beneath him. Her chest tightened with panic as she fought his iron-hold. Dampfang was so much larger and stronger than her— she wouldn't stand a chance if he pinned her.

Frostmask's claws tore at Dampfang's pelt, but his grip didn't waver. Dampfang glowered down at her, his eyes bright with hatred. One forepaw pressed firmly against her chest as the other moved towards her throat, claws outstretched. Frostmask's chest heaved with anxious breaths as she twisted to try to protect her neck.

"I wish you drowned that day as an apprentice," Dampfang hissed. "Then none of this would have happened to my Clan."

"Screw you," Frostmask spat in a hoarse voice, icy terror flooding her.

Dampfang's eyes flashed with rage, but then his weight was suddenly pulled off her. Gasping with relief, Frostmask stumbled to her paws, aching from the cuts and bruises Dampfang had left on her flanks. Autumnleap, fury etched onto his every feature, grappled with Dampfang just a few tail-lengths away. Both toms looked murderous as they viciously tore into each other.

Frostmask blinked.

But if Autumnleap is here, then Paledusk...

Lizardstrike gave a wordless cry of alarm. Frostmask's gaze flashed over to see him facing Paledusk, only for the SkyClan deputy to bat Lizardstrike aside like a kitten as Lizardstrike leapt at him. Then Paledusk advanced towards Frostmask.

Utter terror paralyzed Frostmask for an instant. She crouched down, a mouse trapped under a predator's gaze. Every horrible thing that Paledusk was capable of, flashed through her mind— what he'd done to his brother, to May, to Swoopstrike, to Grovepelt, to her, to *all* the clans. How could she have ever thought she'd stand a chance against him? Why had she thought she could control him? He was more powerful than her in every way.

Now she, her mate, her apprentice, and even her innocent kits... they would all die because of her foolishness.

Frostmask's limbs trembled in fear, but she still managed to unsheathe her claws again. Paledusk might kill them all, but she wasn't going down without a fight.

Remembering every scrap of her battle training, Frostmask blocked out the pain of her current injuries and focused entirely on Paledusk. Her smaller, weaker stature meant speed and maneuverability would be her only advantages against him. She would have to rely on that and her cunning. Frostmask's gaze darted around, looking for anything in her environment that she could use against him. To buy time, she retreated as Paledusk continued to stalk forward. Meanwhile, Lizardstrike prowled behind Paledusk, now limping but looking otherwise steady enough. His gaze flickered from Paledusk to Frostmask repeatedly, trying to understand Frostmask's plan.

Frostmask was unsure of her strategy herself. The piles of twolegs junk in the Carrionplace were useless to her. There was no long grass to conceal her position, trees to leap into, or brambles to hide under. Frostmask could see no advantage beyond continuing to retreat up a slope of trash, giving her the higher ground. But, she was careful to stay away from the area where she'd hidden Newtkit and Mistkit.

Paledusk followed her, his impassive expression giving nothing away. His eyes were as unfeeling as green stones. Taking a deep breath, Frostmask's gaze flickered to Lizardstrike again, and she signaled to him. Lizardstrike surged towards Paledusk's back, but his pawsteps were noisy on the crunchy twoleg trash. Paledusk whirled to face him before Lizardstrike could land an attack. Paledusk rose onto his hindlegs, looming over Lizardstrike and swiping towards his face with long, hooked claws. Frostmask shot forward, hoping to unbalance Paledusk while he was standing on only two paws, but Paledusk had already crouched and turned back to her before she'd reached him.

How is he so fast?!

Frostmask aborted her approach, flinching back as his claws slashed forward. The blow passed so close to her face, wind stirred her fur. For a moment, horror pulsed through her pelt.

If I'd been an an instant slower, I'd have lost my eyes.

Shoving away the frightening thought, Frostmask darted away from Paledusk's front, trying to harry his flanks and hindquarters as Lizardstrike did the same from his other side. But, Paledusk seemed to be everywhere at once. Any time Frostmask got in close enough to skim her claws through his white pelt and maybe snag his skin, Paledusk had already whirled to face her, his claws slashing at her before she had the chance to dodge away again. After only a few moments of this, Frostmask was starting to feel far more battered that Paledusk looked.

But Lizardstrike and I are fighting him two on one!

Frostmask lingered back for a moment, her mind frantically spinning to think up a better plan. As Frostmask tried to catch her breath, Lizardstrike bravely darted forward to engage Paledusk again. But, this time instead of flashing out with a flurry of slashes to keep Lizardstrike at bay, Paledusk charged into Lizardstrike's attack. Frostmask gasped as Paledusk bowled the leaner white cat over, clattering him into the jagged edges of twoleg trash that coated the ground. Paledusk's face twisted into a vicious snarl as he dug his claws into Lizardstrike's sides.

"Lizardstrike!" Frostmask yowled, throwing caution to the wind as she sprinted to help him.

She leapt, landing squarely on Paledusk's back, her claws clinging to his thick-furred pelt. Frostmask aimed her fangs for the back of his neck, but her jaws only closed around Paledusk's shoulder as he twisted. Frostmask only got the chance kick out with her hindlegs once, raking her claws down his spine, before the world suddenly spun as Paledusk slammed himself to the ground and rolled, crushing her beneath him.

Frostmask shrieked in pain. She released Paledusk's pelt from her grip and just started to scramble back to her feet when a massive

paw slammed against the side of her face. The next thing Frostmask knew, her head had been cratered against the ground, the impact leaving her ears ringing.

"You brought this upon yourself, you know," Paledusk hissed to her.

His heavy paw pressed against her skull, shoving her already swelling cheek deeper into the twoleg trash. As he spoke, his hot breath billowed against her ear fur, bringing with it a sickening stench of blood that drifted into her nostrils.

"It didn't have to be this way. You could've just been blind," he growled. "We could've been a family. You could have ruled at my side. But, instead you decided to stick your muzzle into someplace it didn't belong. Instead you chose *this."*

Paledusk's claws ripped down her side, and pain burst from Frostmask's shoulder to hip. She writhed beneath him, her jaws snapping desperately for the paw that held her head down.

A loud growl caught Frostmask's attention as Lizardstrike suddenly reappeared. He was bleeding heavily, but he sank his claws into Paledusk's side, attempting to drag him off her. Paledusk snarled, his paws still firm against Frostmask, holding her in place as he snapped his jaws towards Lizardstrike.

Frostmask slashed towards Paledusk's face as soon as he took his eyes off of her. She was aiming for an eye, but Paledusk flinched back as he caught sight of her paw. Still though, Frostmask's claws caught on his muzzle, ripping open the delicate, pink flesh of his nose.

Paledusk gasped, and his grip loosened enough for Frostmask to wiggle free. She retreated back from Paledusk for several fox-lengths, relieved to see Lizardstrike doing the same. Paledusk was panting slightly, looking unbalanced enough that Frostmask risked taking her eyes off him to check on Autumnleap. Her heart dropped down to her paws as she saw Autumnleap wrestling on the ground with Dampfang. Dampfang was on top, and Autumnleap's responding blows were seemingly growing weaker by the heartbeat, although he was still fighting with everything he had.

Dismay dragged down on every hair of Frostmask's pelt.

She looked back at Paledusk to see him staring at her furiously. His tongue swiped over his bloodied nose. She might have stunned him temporarily with that blow, but it was hardly close to a mortal wound.

Dear StarClan, we're going to lose.

"Stop!" a voice suddenly screeched, interrupting the fighting.

Frostmask's heart leapt at the sudden cry. Dampfang stilled, still pinning Autumnleap to the ground beneath him, but his gaze flew towards the voice. Even Paledusk hesitated, his gaze flicking from Lizardstrike and Frostmask and to the newcomer. Pineshade stood several fox-lengths away from the fighting, her pelt prickling with horror as she took in the scene.

"Another one?" Paledusk spat, sending Dampfang a searing look.

"Pineshade," Frostmask gasped, and pulling her friend's gaze to her. "They stole Newtkit and Mistkit."

Pineshade's eye stretched so wide, a ring of white was visible around her amber iris. She slowly turned her gaze back onto Dampfang and dug her claws into the ground.

"What have you done?" she whispered.

Dampfang's jaw clenched.

"What was necessary," he growled.

Pineshade's whole body shuddered.

"Stealing kits? Trying to kill my brother— your clan-mates? Working with our Clan's enemy?!" she hissed. *"That's necessary?!"*

Dampfang pressed Autumnleap more firmly to the ground as if Pineshade had reminded him that Autumnleap was still beneath his paws, and that he didn't want him to escape. Although Frostmask's gut twisted in worry for Autumnleap, she kept her eyes on

Paledusk. She didn't know how long this reprieve from fighting would last, and she wouldn't let Paledusk leap at her when she was unprepared— or worse— try to go for the kits. Paledusk didn't move a muscle, though, beyond the lashing of his tail as he watched the exchange.

"Dampfang," Pineshade said, her tone calming slightly but taking on an edge of desperation. "You can still make this right. Let Autumnleap go and then help us capture *him."*

She shot a swift glare at Paledusk, who looked almost bored in response, before Pineshade glanced back at Dampfang.

"And, I'll vouch for you to Sedgestar," she said, her ears angling hopefully towards him.

Dampfang shook his head, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

"Sedgestar is part of the problem," he spat, his shoulders tensing. "The very heart of our clan is rotten. It needs to be cut out, or it'll destroy us."

He glanced away from Pineshade and glared down at Autumnleap.

"...I'm sorry Pineshade, but this has to be done," Dampfang growled. "It's for the greater good."

"Whose greater good?!" Pineshade demanded incredulously, taking a stride closer to him.

Dampfang glared at her again. *"ShadowClan's."*

Pineshade growled, her ears pinning back against her head.

"No, Dampfang. What you're doing isn't good for anyone," she said in a low, furious rumble. "Not even for you."

Dampfang was silent.

"And, what if we'd had kits together?" Pineshade blurted out. "And, what if I later told you I had kittypet blood? Would you have killed me and our kits too?"

"What?!" Dampfang's eyes widened incredulously. "But that's just ridiculous! It's not true."

"But what if it was?" Pineshade pressed in a low voice. "What if I had kin who were kittypets."

The sentence no longer sounded like a question, but Dampfang still shook his head vehemently.

"Stop talking about nonsense. You'll understand with time," he said, his words fervent. "You'll see. You'll see that I've done this for ShadowClan. And, for you."

Pineshade's eye blazed with sudden fury as, all at once, her grip on her emotions seemed to snap. A wordless yowl tore from her throat, and she lunged, colliding hard with Dampfang and shoving him off Autumnleap.

"Don't you dare us *me* to justify *this!"* Pineshade snarled, her voice muffled by Dampfang's thick pelt in her jaws and what sounded like a sob in her throat.

As suddenly as it began, the spell over the fight was over. Paledusk surged towards Frostmask again, as quick as a lightning blot. Frostmask danced back, but to her shock, Paledusk just barreled past her. Confusion whirled in her for a heartbeat.

Is he fleeing?!

But, then Frostmask saw the direction he was sprinting.

"Stop him!" she shrieked as she raced after him. "He's going for the kits!"

Autumnleap was closest. He hauled himself up despite his injuries and surged to intercept Paledusk. He wasn't strong enough to hold him, but Autumnleap at least slowed Paledusk enough that Frostmask was able to pass him, skidding to a stop in front of the place she'd hidden Mistkit and Newtkit. She just barely glimpsed the glint of their eyes in the darkness of the gap for a moment before she whipped around to face Paledusk again as he shook himself free of Autumnleap.

"Just surrender!" she snarled, fluffing out her fur and digging her claws into the ground.

Paledusk's gaze narrowed at her. Lizardstrike had appeared, limping over as quickly as he could, and Autumnleap had pulled himself back to his paws behind Paledusk. They were injured, as was Frostmask. Her whole body stung and ached, and her hurt cheek was now so swollen, she could barely see out of the eye on that side. But, Pineshade's appearance had been a huge boon. She was keeping Dampfang at bay. Now their battle was four on two, and Paledusk's victory looked much less certain... but still not impossible.

Frostmask tried to not let the doubts she felt show on her face, but Paledusk had to have sensed them. Frostmask's legs shook as Paledusk took a couple of steps closer to her, but there was nowhere for her to run now that she had her kits to defend. Autumnleap and Lizardstrike darted nervously behind Paledusk. Frostmask could see the worry in their faces, but they were unsteady on their feet. They didn't have the strength or stamina left to continue fighting indefinitely.

'Wait to attack,' Frostmask signed to them.

They should conserve their remaining energy until they saw how Paledusk responded. Autumnleap and Lizardstrike both nodded in acknowledgment, but they stayed close behind Paledusk, their muscles tense.

Paledusk paused a couple of tail-lengths away from Frostmask and drew himself up to his full height, composing himself.

"If *you* surrender," he said cooly, "I promise, your kits will not be harmed."

Frostmask couldn't stop the incredulous huff that slipped from her lips.

"As if I would believe a word you say," she growled.

Paledusk blinked, cold fire burning in his eyes.

"So be it," he growled.

Frostmask tensed as Paledusk lunged, but her swollen cheek meant she didn't see his paw coming from the side until it had already crashed into her, knocking her out from his path.

Autumnleap and Lizardstrike moved as one. Lizardstrike grasped Paledusk's hindquarters, draping half his body weight over him in order to drag Paledusk back as much as he could. Meanwhile, Autumnleap grappled with Paledusk's shoulders, his jaws reaching for Paledusk's scruff.

Paledusk plowed forward despite their efforts. His paw stretched past Frostmask. Mistkit and Newtkit's voices rose in cries of terror. Frostmask scrambled back to her feet, her heart racing faster than a terrified rabbit's. Energy, fury and fear buzzed through her every muscle, bringing a fresh wave of strength.

Paledusk snarled, straining against Autumnleap and Lizardstrike. He tore through twoleg trash and reached into the gap that held the kits. Autumnleap's teeth finally bit down into Paledusk's scruff, wrenching his head back, just as Frostmask shoved herself back between Paledusk and her kits.

Her claws lashed out, sank into Paledusk's throat, and *tore*. Paledusk staggered suddenly against Autumnleap and Lizardstrike, his eyes bulging with surprise. Frostmask panted, shrinking back to crouch over the ragged gap in the ground that held her kits. Paledusk had clawed enough trash away that they were nearly out in the open now. They cowered just behind her, but Frostmask still didn't scent blood on them.

However, a massive crimson flower was blossoming in the white fur of Paledusk's neck. Autumnleap and Lizardstrike released him and warily backed away. The SkyClan deputy swayed on his paws.

Paledusk's lips curled up. His mouth opened as if to speak, but only a strangled gargle emerged. A splash of red was hacked up from the back of his throat in place of words, staining his tongue and fangs before dripping to the ground. A convulsion rippled through his pelt. Frostmask kept her eyes locked on Paledusk as she wrapped

her tail around her trembling kits, drawing them closer to her and shielding them from the sight.

Paledusk's furious, green gaze met Frostmask's. His face remained fixed in that final, gruesome snarl as he collapsed to the ground, and the light went out in his eyes.

Blood of the Covenant

Her father's blood was sticky, congealing on her paws. The texture and scent of it made bile rise in the back of her throat. She couldn't look away from Paledusk's body. His large, white form was limp on the ground, and still... So still.

The feeling of Newtkit shifting against her brought Frostmask back to herself. Her ears pricked, sound registering again as she realized she could still hear Dampfang's and Pineshade's snarls as the two battled on.

"Are they okay?" Autumnleap gasped.

He was missing chunks of fur, covered in scratches, and still holding one hindleg off of the ground, but all of his attention and concern was directed towards the small forms bundled between Frostmask's tail and her flank. Frostmask moved her tail slightly so they could peer down at them. Newtkit and Mistkit crouched silently, shivering and too fearful to speak. Frostmask probed their pelts with her muzzle, sniffing and licking as she searched for wounds. She wanted to collapse with relief as she found nothing. They were certainly roughed up— dirty, nicked, and bruised— but there was no blood besides what she'd accidentally smeared into their fur.

"They're okay," she breathed.

Autumnleap heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank StarClan. I'm going to help Pineshade. You should stay with them."

Moving as quickly as his injured leg allowed, Autumnleap sprung down the slope of twoleg garbage and rushed towards Dampfang's and Pineshade's still-tussling dark forms. Frostmask gazed after him worriedly for a moment.

Can just the two of them beat Dampfang?

She looked at Dampfang more closely, realizing that his movements

weren't as powerful and precise as they'd been earlier. Pineshade was able to dodge several of his blows, and the attacks that did land were only on her flanks and shoulders, rather than her neck or face.

He's worn out... or holding back.

As Autumnleap pounced on Dampfang from behind, Frostmask's attention snapped over to Lizardstrike when he staggered up to her side. Worry flooded her as she noticed how unsteady he was on his paws. Then her anxiety sharpened closer to panic as she realized how much of his white pelt was stained red.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

Lizardstrike didn't answer. His blue gaze was glazed, and his eyelids fluttered. He started to slump to the side.

"Lizardstrike!" Frostmask gasped, shoving her shoulder against his to keep him from crashing to the ground.

Fear threatened to crawl up her throat and strangle her as she lowered Lizardstrike's unconscious form down. Desperately, she began to groom through his fur as she'd done to her kits, searching for the source of his injuries. He was covered in slashes, none of them too deep alone, but combined, the blood-loss was significant.

"...Is he okay?" Mistkit whimpered, finally finding his voice again.

He and Newtkit were now hiding beneath Frostmask's belly and staring at their collapsed clan-mate with huge eyes.

"He's— he's only fainted," Frostmask stammered, praying with every hair on her pelt that was true.

To her utter relief, as she fussed over Lizardstrike's wounds, his eyelids flickered and opened, but his gaze was still bleary as he lifted his chin off the ground.

Frostmask put a gentle paw on his shoulder.

'Wait a moment,' she ordered. *'You need to regain your strength.'*

Lizardstrike nodded without argument. His expression was exhausted as he let his head thump back down. Frostmask surveyed his flanks, relieved to see that blood had slowed to an ooze from his cuts. Too much movement, though, would certainly start them bleeding again.

A victorious yowl from Autumnleap sent Frostmask's gaze flying back towards him. His chest was heaving, but his auburn tail was held high as he and Pineshade together pinned Dampfang beneath them. Dampfang lay limp, his normally sleek, black fur stained with grime and blood.

Is... is he dead?

Frostmask couldn't tell if she was relieved or frightened at that thought.

She guided Newtkit and Mistkit slowly down the slope of twoleg trash, Lizardstrike following them. As she walked, Frostmask made sure her tail always brushed against her kits— constantly reassuring both them, and herself, of their safety.

As Frostmask padded up to Autumnleap, she saw his amber eyes burned with a fierce triumph, but Pineshade's gaze was hollow. She only blinked dully at Frostmask as she came to look down at Dampfang.

Closer now she could see he was very much alive, but badly injured. A deep gash ran across Dampfang's ribs. He was also missing chunks of belly fur, and several nasty scratches decorated his muzzle. Dampfang's green gaze was as baleful as ever as he glared at Frostmask, but he didn't try to break free of Autumnleap's and Pineshade's grip and attack again. Still, Frostmask curled her tail more tightly around her kits, drawing them even closer to her side.

"It's *over,"* Frostmask rasped, although she wasn't sure if she was speaking for her own sake or Dampfang's.

She glanced for a final time over her shoulder, her gaze lingering on Paledusk's white pelt lying among the piles of twoleg garbage.

Feeling ill again, she ripped her eyes away.

"Take the traitor back to camp," Frostmask muttered to Autumnleap and Pineshade. "Sedgestar will decide what to do with him."

Autumnleap blinked. He didn't ask her what they should do with Paledusk's body, and she was relieved for it. She didn't like the idea of leaving it for the rats, but... she didn't think she'd be able to walk with him back to camp either. Autumnleap just nodded, shifting his weight off of Dampfang's flanks.

"Get up," Autumnleap snarled to him. "But, make one wrong move, and you're crow-food."

Although a haunted look persisted in Pineshade's expression, she didn't hesitate to flank Dampfang with her brother, her lips curling back in a fearsome snarl as Dampfang glanced at her. Growling, Dampfang laboriously hauled himself to his paws. Despite his injuries, he kept his head held high as they marched him out of the Carrionplace— Autumnleap and Pineshade close on either side, and Frostmask, Lizardstrike, and the kits following a safe distance behind.

Their progress was slow thanks to the kits and their injuries. Frostmask found herself glancing over at Lizardstrike every few strides, making sure his wounds hadn't started gushing blood again. He was limping along valiantly, but Frostmask could see his pain reflected in the tightness of his expression.

Poolcloud's worried yowl greeted them as they came into sight of the camp. He'd been standing guard outside the thorn barrier and rushed up to their battered group as they arrived.

"They're okay!" he gasped, relief shining in his eyes as he stared at the kits before he swept his gaze over Frostmask and the others. "What happened?! Was it ThunderClan?!"

Frostmask blinked, her mind suddenly turning back to the battle that'd been raging against her leader and Clanmates. She'd almost entirely forgotten about it as she'd been fighting her own battle against her father.

"Is Sedgestar's patrol back yet?" she asked, her claws scraping the ground anxiously.

Poolcloud shook his head. "We haven't heard anything."

Frostmask inhaled deeply, desperately hoping that that was good thing.

"Poolcloud, I need you to take the kits to Dewleaf," she murmured as Autumnleap and Pineshade brushed past their brother to escort Dampfang into the camp. "Make sure she doesn't let them leave her side."

"Of course, I—" Poolcloud began with a nod.

"Then, I need you to join Autumnleap and Pineshade with guarding Dampfang," she muttered, interrupting him.

Poolcloud's jaw dropped with bewilderment.

"Frostmask... what *happened?"* he hissed again under his breath.

Frostmask sighed, suddenly exhausted down to her bones. "I'll explain everything as soon as I can, but I need you to do this for me right now. *Please,* I'm asking you as your deputy and your friend."

Poolcloud still blinked at her hard for a moment before finally nodding.

"Alright," he said.

He bent his head down to start to herd the kits forward with soft nudges of his muzzle.

"Now come along you two," he said in a much softer, gentler voice. "Let's get you back to the nursery and get you cleaned up. Larkfoot, Dewleaf, and the others have all been very worried about you."

Newtkit shot a wide-eyed look at Frostmask as Poolcloud coasted her and her brother out from under Frostmask's belly and towards the thorn tunnel. Frostmask encouraged them along with a nod and a reassuring purr, hiding the feeling of sickness that rose in her at

her kits' wariness. Just yesterday, they wouldn't have hesitated to go running anywhere Poolcloud had told them to go.

...Or even anywhere Dampfang told them.

Frostmask swallowed hard, rage rising in her, and she wanted to claw Dampfang apart all over again. Instead, she just forced her paws forward, following Poolcloud and Lizardstrike to finally enter back into the camp.

The camp was quiet and tense, awaiting the returning patrols, but all eyes shifted to Frostmask and the kits as they entered inside.

"You found them! Thank StarClan!" Clearstream's voice cried out, joy shimmering in her blue eyes as she stared out at the kits from across camp.

"Are the rest of you alright? What happened?! We heard that the kits went missing?!" another voice demanded.

Frostmask glanced over, relief running through her as Redclaw rushed up to her, Weaseltail just a footfall behind. They'd been out on a hunting patrol with Snakeeyes and Minnowpaw, but it looked like they'd all returned to camp unharmed. They must not have encountered any of the attacking cats while they'd been out. Snakeeyes was already fussing over Lizardstrike's wounds, her ears pinned back with worry, while Minnowpaw and Mallowpaw crouched in front of the apprentices' den and stared wide-eyed at the returning group.

"I'll explain later but—" Frostmask began.

"I also want to know what is going on!" Darkpelt's rough meow cut in.

He was planted in front of the Oak Tree with Elmclaw. It took Frostmask only a glance to realize what had happened. Autumnleap and Pineshade were stubbornly blocking their way to the tunnel that led down to Sedgestar's den. They must have commandeered it as a holding place for Dampfang.

"Dampfang is injured, but they just shoved my son inside

Sedgestar's den. Now they are refusing to let Elmclaw in to treat him!" Darkpelt growled, his claws tearing at the dirt with frustration.

Frostmask's tongue suddenly felt as heavy as a boulder in her mouth. She hadn't yet considered how she'd explain Dampfang's treachery to the Clan. Pineshade and Autumnleap stared at her silently, clearly waiting for her lead before saying anything themselves.

"Lizardstrike is the most injured," Frostmask said. "Elmclaw needs to treat him first, then the rest of us."

Elmclaw took one look at Lizardstrike and seemed to agree with Frostmask's assessment. Darkpelt growled, but didn't stop Elmclaw as he got to his paws and hurried towards Lizardstrike.

"Bring him into my den," Elmclaw told Snakeeyes.

She nodded and started guiding her son towards Clanrock.

"Sedgestar will explain everything once he's back," Frostmask said, raising her voice to project it to the rest of the confused and worried camp.

The news will be best coming from our leader, she decided.

Frostmask's heart dropped down to her paws.

If he believes me and doesn't just chase me out of ShadowClan...

But, there was no more hiding the truth now, not with Paledusk's body cooling in the Carrionplace. She would just have to accept Sedgestar's judgment— whatever that may be.

The clan acquiesced to Frostmask's declaration with a few grumbles and a flurry of whispers. Frostmask tried to ignore the feeling of their gazes flittering over her again and again. Poolcloud emerged from the nursery and padded up to Frostmask, his amber gaze deeply troubled.

"They've settled in with Dewleaf," he muttered in her ear. "She's

calmed them down, but Mistkit said something about Dampfang—"

Anxiety flared in Frostmask's belly.

"Don't say anything to anyone else yet," she hissed quickly, her ears angling back. "They need to hear the news from Sedgestar. Or, I'm scared they won't believe me."

Poolcloud's eyes went wider, horror welling in his expression.

"Then it's true?" he whispered. "He's the one that stole them from camp?"

Frostmask nodded grimly. Poolcloud blinked hard, heaving a sigh.

"I'll go help guard him," he murmured.

He turned and padded towards Pineshade and Autumnleap as Elmclaw appeared from the medicine cat's den and did the same.

"Well? Who's next?" the medicine cat asked, his tail-tip flicking with impatience as he surveyed the pair of them before glancing towards Frostmask.

Frostmask's wounds were stinging badly, and she still couldn't see out of one eye because of her swollen cheek. But, she had to be waiting in camp for the moment Sedgestar arrived. She had to speak to him before anyone else could and explain what had happened. Autumnleap also seemed determined to stay at his post guarding Dampfang, but Pineshade jerked her chin towards him.

"He hasn't been able to put his weight on one of his hindlegs," she reported to Elmclaw.

Autumnleap scowled like he wanted to protest until Poolcloud whispered something in his ear. With an annoyed growl, Autumnleap relinquished his guard post to Poolcloud and limped after Elmclaw to the medicine cat's den.

Only a few moments after Autumnleap's tail vanished into Elmclaw's den, ThunderClan scent suddenly drifted into camp. Every cat in Frostmask's vicinity leapt to their paws with snarls and

hisses of alarm, and Frostmask's belly clenched.

Attacking warriors!

But, I'm in no state to fight another battle!

Frostmask exchanged a frightened glance with Poolcloud and Pineshade. Before she could decide whether they should leave Dampfang unguarded and rush out to meet the approaching ThunderClan cats or not, the thorn barrier rustled and two cats came in one after the other. Sedgestar was first. Frostmask had to stifle a gasp of shock and horror at the sight of the ShadowClan leader. He looked haggard; his chest fur matted with blood and his neck equally as soaked. A jagged slash snaked all the way across his throat— the thin, fragile skin sealing it red and raw, like the slightest disturbance could rip it right back open. It was obvious it had been a mortal wound.

Right behind Sedgestar came Morningstar, moving to step towards Sedgestar's side as soon as he entered camp. His grey pelt was blood splattered, but his head was held up proud and strong as he stood against the sagging Sedgestar.

Yowls of outrage rose up from ShadowClan. Warriors surged forward to rescue their leader, but Sedgestar's tail shot up high in the air for attention before anyone could reach them.

"Wait." His normally smooth and powerful voice came out in a hoarse rasp. "I know you heard that it was ThunderClan and WindClan who had attacked us, but it was actually *SkyClan* and WindClan. The SkyClan warriors had disguised their scents as ThunderClan to seed confusion. Morningstar and his patrol heard our battle and came to our aid. Together, we drove the invaders out."

The ShadowClan cats stilled, mutters of surprise rising from the group. Frostmask's ears pinned back with understanding.

SkyClan!

Their attack must have been coordinated with Paledusk's.

Frostmask's stomach knotted with guilt.

Was this all done to try to kill me?

Morningstar nodded, turning his bright blue gaze onto Sedgestar as the rest of the bedraggled ShadowClan battle patrol staggered into camp, streaming around the two leaders.

"Consider our debt to your Clan repaid," Morningstar rumbled, his gaze narrowing.

Frostmask blinked in shock. It must have taken a lot for ThunderClan's leader to come to ShadowClan's rescue when he still blamed them for trespassing and prey stealing. But, apparently, his sense of nobility and honor would not have allowed him to leave his deal with Sedgestar unfulfilled.

Or he made a calculated decision to repay it now, to clear his conscience for any attacks he's planning in the future, a cynical thought pointed out.

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake, hoping to dislodge the doubt.

He doesn't know yet it wasn't ShadowClan trespassing— just Paledusk and a traitor stirring up trouble between our Clans. Morningstar will have no reason to be aggressive once he knows the truth.

Frostmask turned her attention onto the returning warriors, and her belly clenched at their sorry state. ShadowClan had won, but it hardly looked like it judging by their expressions. The cats who'd been on the initial patrol with Sedgestar had clearly taken the worst of the beating. A deep V had been carved into one of Emberflower's ears, and a rusty red of dried blood clumped in the ginger fur of her head. Beeclaw seemed reluctant to let one of his bitten forepaws even brush the ground. Marigoldpaw had long scratches down his sides. Dustleap was missing huge clumps of ginger fur as he entered camp, but Frostmask's horror only grew as he turned back towards the thorn barrier to help Cricketsong tug a fluffy, dark form through the tunnel.

Oh StarClan, not Hollowshade...

Frostmask's heart ached. The formidable warrior hung limply in the jaws of her father and sister. Dustleap's eyes were dull with grief as he and Cricketsong carried her to the center of camp. Cedarfur followed behind his family, his tail dragging through the dirt. Grief dragged at the ends of Frostmask's pelt, but she didn't have the time yet to mourn her fallen clan-mate. Instead, she began to make her way through the crowd of warriors, heading for Sedgestar's side.

"Sedgestar," she muttered in her leader's ear as she reached him. "I need to speak with you, privately. It's very urgent."

Sedgestar turned his tired gaze onto her, but his amber eyes sharpened as he noticed the blood in her pelt.

"Were you also attacked?" he asked.

Frostmask nodded, her claws flexing anxiously. "That's what I need to talk to you about."

"Alright." Sedgestar hauled himself back to his paws. "Let's go to my den."

"Um— not your den," Frostmask muttered quickly. "We are holding Dampfang there under guard."

Sedgestar's ears flattened in confusion. "Dampfang?"

From behind Sedgestar, Frostmask saw Morningstar's blue eyes flash with interest. Frostmask stiffened as the ThunderClan leader angled his head towards her. Sedgestar quickly noticed her gaze and seemed to remember that Morningstar was still nearby. Lifting his chin, he turned to face him.

"Thank you, Morningstar," Sedgestar rasped. "But, now ShadowClan needs to deal with our own affairs."

Morningstar's brow furrowed.

"ThunderClan's debt is paid," was all he said again.

With a swish of his bushy grey tail, Morningstar turned and strode out of ShadowClan's camp with his head high.

"Well, since my den is occupied, we will use the elders' for the moment," Sedgestar muttered.

Frostmask's fur prickled in relief that he hadn't immediately demanded for Dampfang to be freed.

He still trusts my word enough about that, at least.

Although, she would have to see how long that trust would last once she started to tell him everything.

"Can I bring Pineshade and Autumnleap?" Frostmask asked Sedgestar. "They and Lizardstrike are witnesses for what happened, but Lizardstrike is badly hurt right now."

The furrow in Sedgestar's brow grew deeper. Frostmask suspected that he was concerned by why they needed any 'witnesses' at all.

"The two of them can come, but don't disturb Lizardstrike if he's injured. I can speak with him later if needed," Sedgestar said.

Frostmask nodded and waved Pineshade over to her. Pineshade padded up, leaving just Poolcloud on guard. But, Poolcloud was uninjured and strong; he wouldn't have a problem guarding Dampfang alone.

"Can you get Autumnleap and meet us in the elders' den?" Frostmask asked Pineshade.

Pineshade nodded and headed off.

Sedgestar had already started to make his way over to the pine stump that formed the den, Emberflower supporting him as he walked. Frostmask quickly caught up to her leader, her stomach clenching as she got a better look at the gash across his throat.

"Did you lose a life?" Frostmask whispered.

Sedgestar's gaze flashed and for a moment, Frostmask thought he

might not answer her.

"...I lost two," he said softly.

Fear flooded Frostmask. She hadn't even considered that an injury could be so bad that it would require more than one life to heal.

"Those *rogues* cut him off from the rest of us and pinned him down," Emberflower snarled, looking more furious than Frostmask had ever seen her. "I've never seen such dishonorable fighting in my life! They looked like they wanted to tear each and every life away!"

"They probably would have if Morningstar and his patrol hadn't arrived then," Sedgestar growled quietly.

Emberflower rasped her tongue over Sedgestar's cheek a few times, although Frostmask couldn't tell if she was doing it to soothe Sedgestar or herself. Frostmask felt more than a bit horrified as well.

This must have been another part of Paledusk and Dampfang's plan! If they killed both me and Sedgestar, ShadowClan wouldn't have anyone to lead them.

"You should really see Elmclaw," Emberflower fretted over Sedgestar as they reached the den and Sedgestar explained to the nearby elders' that they needed to use it for a moment. "You can barely walk on your own four paws. Surely your meeting with Frostmask can wait?"

"No. What can wait is my turn with Elmclaw," Sedgestar rasped, nodding gratefully to Greytail and Clearstream as they cleared out from the elders' den. "Let him treat my clan-mates with only one life to lose first."

"But you—" Emberflower began anxiously before biting her tongue.

Frostmask's neck fur prickled with a sudden icy intuition.

...Does Sedgestar only have one life left?

Fear and stress surged through her at the thought. She wasn't ready

to become ShadowClan's leader! Especially not after how badly she'd messed up with Paledusk! But if the day had gone only slightly differently— if Morningstar and ThunderClan had hesitated only a few moments longer before deciding to come to ShadowClan's aid, or if they hadn't come at all— there would have been no other cat who could take the leadership of ShadowClan but Frostmask.

Frostmask was immensely grateful that it wasn't the case— that Sedgestar was out of mortal danger even if he was weakened. But, she still couldn't shake the tingle of deep-rooted panic at the alternative.

Although I doubt I will be deputy for much longer, once Sedgestar learns the truth. Frostmask thought anxiously. *In fact, I'd be lucky if he only strips me of the position.*

She was starting to be tugged into a dark spiral of dread in her mind. What if Sedgestar decided to exile her for her treachery? Would Autumnleap and her kits want to come with her? What if they were separated? How could she manage a life on her own?

Emberflower left them as Sedgestar and Frostmask entered into the elders' den, and Pineshade and Autumnleap arrived only a moment later. Autumnleap went straight to her side, his pelt brushing hers reassuringly. Frostmask sighed, feeling the creeping tendrils of panic start to recede at his warm touch.

She was relieved to see fresh herbs and clean cobwebs plastered on Autumnleap's pelt. She, Pineshade, and Sedgestar were still dirty and blood-splattered, but slowly, they were recovering.

Frostmask's heart clenched. She and her friends *would* recover. She had to believe that. No matter what came next.

"Well. Which one of you wants to explain why you all are injured, and why Dampfang is being held prisoner in my den?" Sedgestar began unceremoniously, his voice cool.

"Sir, Dampfang is the worst kind of traitor imaginable!" Autumnleap burst out, his eyes wide and passionate as he sank his claws into the

mossy nests below them.

Sedgestar's ears angled back in shock. *"Really?* The last I saw of Dampfang, he was fighting our enemies valiantly before running back to camp to get reinforcements. Reinforcements that arrived and saved *many* clan-mates' lives."

"It was a ploy, Sedgestar," Frostmask rasped, drawing the leader's attention. "Dampfang was working with SkyClan's deputy, Paledusk, to launch a coordinated attack to kill both you and me. Once Dampfang returned to camp to get reinforcements, he stole Mistkit and Newtkit to lure me into an ambush with Paledusk at the Carrionplace. The only reason why we survived is because I didn't go alone. Lizardstrike and Autumnleap came with me and Pineshade arrived not long afterwards."

Pineshade dipped her head in agreement.

"I was meant to join the patrol of reinforcements along with Autumnleap, but when I noticed Autumnleap wasn't with us, I was worried something had happened to him. I went back for him and tracked him and the others to the Carrionplace," she said in a low voice.

Sedgestar's brow was furrowed.

"Why would Dampfang do such a thing?" he asked.

"He thought we were making ShadowClan weak," Frostmask growled.

"You can ask the kits or Lizardstrike if you don't believe us," Autumnleap said with a firm nod. "They can verify the story."

Sedgestar blinked hard. Frostmask could see his effort to keep his expression composed, but his whiskers were still drawn back against his face and his ears slated uneasily.

"Are the kits unharmed?" he asked.

Frostmask nodded. "They're okay— physically, at least. But, very frightened."

A myriad of emotions glittered in Sedgestar's amber eyes. Frostmask recognized anger, disbelief, and confusion among them, all swirling together.

"It's not that I don't believe that you were attacked, or even that Dampfang was involved," Sedgestar said slowly. "But, why such a complicated plot? If SkyClan and Dampfang's goal was to kill us both, why not just ambush us on a patrol together? Why disguise themselves as ThunderClan; why lure you to the Carrionplace?"

Frostmask swallowed hard, bracing herself.

"Because Paledusk couldn't allow me to know until the last moment that he or SkyClan was involved in the attack," Frostmask rasped, forcing the words out before she could lose her nerve. "Because if I knew, I would have told everyone the truth— that Paledusk is a murderer, and my father."

Sedgestar went as still as a cat carved from stone, and Frostmask began her story.

She left no detail out as she described how hurt she'd been after Sedgestar had accused her of being a traitor and told her that he father was a SkyClan cat. She told him how she'd guessed that Paledusk was her father, and her first meeting with him— her anger with him, but how he'd twisted Sedgestar's words until she'd believed that maybe Sedgestar had been the one lying to her instead of him. She confessed to her several Fourtrees meetings with Paledusk, and what she'd learned from him about her mother and Paledusk's brother. She explained Paledusk's desire for an alliance between ShadowClan and SkyClan against ThunderClan. Then, how her suspicions about him had grown as tensions conveniently rose between ThunderClan and ShadowClan.

"I think it was him, or maybe Dampfang, planting ShadowClan scents and hunting prey in ThunderClan territory," Frostmask explained. "He had to drive ShadowClan and ThunderClan apart, and turn any other potential allies against us so that we would have no choice but to ask SkyClan for help. Then he eventually hoped we would help SkyClan drive ThunderClan out of the forest for good."

Sedgestar remained silent as Frostmask talked, absorbing everything she told him with an unreadable expression. Frostmask was grateful for the chance to explain everything in full, but her anxiety about how Sedgestar felt about her mounting list of crimes only grew as she continued.

Frostmask explained how she'd gone to the twoleg-place, and how her fears about Paledusk's true nature were confirmed when she met Pepper and Slatewhisker— who she learned Paledusk had tried to murder. She told Sedgestar about her confrontation with Paledusk, then how she'd told Autumnleap, Pineshade, and Poolcloud the truth as insurance in case she was killed. And, finally, she said how she'd threatened Paledusk to keep SkyClan away from their clan, or else she would destroy all the carefully crafted lies he'd built his life on.

"I thought I'd found a way to keep ShadowClan safe," Frostmask rasped, her ears drooping. "I thought that I'd be able to control Paledusk... But then he planned this whole attack to try to kill us just because I dared to challenge him. It's my fault any cat got hurt, and Hollowshade died."

"No. It's *Dampfang's* fault, and Paledusk's, and the rest of SkyClan!" Autumnleap spat, brushing his tail against her flank reassuringly.

"Where is Paledusk now?" Sedgestar asked, speaking for the first time since Frostmask had begun her story.

"In the Carrionplace. Dead... I killed him," Frostmask said, her voice coming out more flat than she'd expected.

"We had to do it," Autumnleap said defensively. "He was threatening our kits."

Sedgestar looked at Autumnleap silently for several long moments. Autumnleap lifted his chin, although Frostmask could tell from the tautness of his muscles he was trying hard not to fidget under the intensity of Sedgestar's gaze.

"Autumnleap, Pineshade leave us," Sedgestar ordered. "I want to speak to Frostmask alone."

Autumnleap didn't move a muscle.

"You can't punish her for this!" he hissed. "Paledusk tricked her just like he's tricked everyone he'd ever spoken to! Frostmask did a good thing, uncovering the truth and then getting rid of Paledusk."

"Autumnleap," Sedgestar said, a growl starting to enter his voice. "That was an order."

Pineshade nudged Autumnleap's shoulder, but he still didn't rise to his paws.

"Go," Frostmask urged him under her breath. "I deserve whatever Sedgestar decides."

Autumnleap looked frightened, and even Pineshade shot her a worried look. But, after another hard nudge from his sister, Autumnleap finally rose to his paws. Sedgestar heaved a deep sigh as they exited the den, and Frostmask bowed her head before him, lowering her muzzle so deeply, her whiskers nearly brushed her still bloodstained paws.

"Sedgestar, I am so sorry for everything," she said desperately down to the ground. "I went behind your back. I met with an enemy warrior. I promise my intent was never to endanger ShadowClan, but I... I know my actions harmed my clan-mates. If you exile me, just—"

"Exile?" Sedgestar cut her off incredulously. "Frostmask, I'm not exiling you."

Haltingly, Frostmask risked lifting her eyes to Sedgestar. She worried she'd find rage in his features, but instead he just looked exhausted. Sedgestar shifted, repositioning to lower himself into a crouch and tuck his paws under his chest. He blinked at her. Frostmask knew it was likely just the toll of the two lives he'd recently lost, but for the first time... she thought her leader looked old.

"I'm not *pleased*," Sedgestar began, and Frostmask winced at the sour note in his voice. "But, I've seen the kind of cat you are. I believe

that you did not intend to hurt ShadowClan. And, I cannot blame you for Paledusk's actions, just like I can't blame you for Dampfang's."

Relief fluttered in Frostmask's chest. So far Sedgestar had been taking the news far better than she would have ever dared hope.

"We certainly have a lot to discuss about Paledusk," the leader continued, his mew hard and brisk. "But, that will have to wait. Our clan is recovering from a battle. We must tend to our injured clan-mates, and deal with Dampfang."

"'We?'" Frostmask echoed, blinking in shock. "Then I'm... I'm still deputy?"

"Yes, Frostmask." Sedgestar hauled himself to his paws. "Now let's go tell the Clan about Dampfang."

Without another word, he turned to stride out of the elders' den. After a moment of surprised stillness, Frostmask hurried to trail behind him, her head spinning. Sedgestar looked like more of himself with every step he took towards Clanrock. His chin steadily lifted, his tail grew higher, and by the time he reached the base of the massive boulder, determination and righteous fury burned like fire in his amber eyes.

Even though his motions were stiff, Sedgestar still managed to spring onto the Clanrock and scale it to its zenith before letting out a commanding yowl.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath Clanrock!"

The angry, anguished buzz of conversation that had filled the clearing petered out at Sedgestar's cry. Frostmask took a seat at the base of the Clanrock and gazed out at the Clan. The camp was much fuller now than it'd been when she'd started her meeting with Sedgestar. It looked like the rest of the patrols from the morning had retuned unharmed; at least there were no other unexpected ambushes or injuries that they had to worry about.

Frostmask found Autumnleap's gaze in the crowd. He was staring at her with wide, anxious eyes from outside the nursery. Frostmask gave him a reassuring nod, trying to signal that she was alright. He blinked, and she could see his shoulders loosen.

She was glad to see him in front of the nursery. Frostmask's heart ached as she thought of their kits. She'd been so busy since they'd gotten back to camp that she'd hadn't even gotten a chance to check on them. Were they doing alright? At least they had Autumnleap to comfort them. How would she ever explain to them what had happened?

As the crowd settled down and turned their attention to Sedgestar and Frostmask, she found herself unable to meet her clan-mates' gazes. Instead, her eyes angled down to her paws, and their now rusty red-brown fur. She must look like such a mess, with her scratches, swollen cheek, and blood-splattered pelt. She took a few hesitant licks of one paw, trying to clean it. The taste of salt and iron filled her nose and sat heavy on her tongue. A wave of nausea crashed over her. Swallowing back the bile that rose in her throat, Frostmask placed her paw back down.

I'll wash it off in the stream.

"What are we going to do, Sedgestar?!" Marshnose's voice rose up.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him on his paws, his tail lashing.

"This snake-hearted ambush from WindClan and SkyClan is unbelievable!" he spat. "Say the word, and I'll gather a patrol of warriors to take to their camps! They won't expect us to strike back so quickly!"

"Wait, Marshnose," Sedgestar said, his voice rough with impatience. "There is much about this attack that you don't know— that none of you know. We must explain before we make any moves for retaliation."

Sedgestar swept his gaze over the camp until his eyes settled on where Poolcloud still sat in front of the Oak Tree.

"Bring out the prisoner," Sedgestar growled.

Poolcloud gave a curt nod and whirled around, disappearing into the tunnel that led down to Sedgestar's den. Murmurs started to rise from the crowd, and those murmurs exploded into yowls of confusion and shock as Poolcloud reemerged, pushing Dampfang out in front of him.

Dampfang stumbled at Poolcloud's shove, but he caught himself before he could fall to the ground. His green eyes blazed with the same arrogance as ever as he lifted his chin and limped into the crowd, Poolcloud shadowing him.

Frostmask's legs shook, and she realized that her claws had unsheathed and gripped the ground beneath her. She wanted to spring at Dampfang and claw that expression off of his face. Sedgestar's eyes were narrowed to icy amber chips as he watched the traitor approach.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Darkpelt's bellowing yowl cut through all the other noise. "Prisoner?! *My son?"*

The elder was on his paws and glaring at Sedgestar.

"Yes," Sedgestar said, silencing the other voices with a loud hiss. "This cat stands accused as a traitor to ShadowClan. He conspired with the SkyClan deputy, Paledusk, to try to kill his clan-mates. As my patrol was being attacked by SkyClan and WindClan, Dampfang stole Mistkit and Newtkit to lure Frostmask to Paledusk in the Carrionplace, intending to murder her. However, Autumnleap, Lizardstrike, and Pineshade joined Frostmask. Together they managed to save the kits, subdue Dampfang and kill Paledusk."

The crowd heaved like a turbulent river as Sedgestar spoke. Yowls ranging from outright denial to disbelieving shock to pure fury echoed throughout the camp.

Frostmask recognized one of those voices as Redclaw's, and her gaze found the red and black queen. Redclaw was glaring murderously at Dampfang. Her claws were unsheathed, and she vibrated with wrath. Weaseltail's tail winding around her shoulders

seemed to be the only thing keeping her from flying at Dampfang at this very moment.

Dampfang stood still and calm despite the chaos churning around him.

"Do you deny it?!" Sedgestar demanded.

"Frostmask is the traitor to ShadowClan!" Dampfang spat venomously. "Not me!"

"...How do we know this story is true, Sedgestar?" Darkpelt's voice rose up again.

He seemed far less certain than he'd been only moments ago. His brow was now furrowed with concern rather than righteous anger, but he clearly wasn't convinced of his son's treachery.

"As I said, Pineshade, Lizardstrike, Autumnleap, Frostmask, and their kits were all there." Sedgestar's voice rumbled with a growl. "They can all account for it."

"It's the truth!" Autumnleap yowled, leaping to his paws. "Dampfang is a traitor!"

Frostmask's gaze flickered to where Lizardstrike crouched in front of the medicine cat's den with Snakeeyes and Rowanheart. Snakeeyes' body moved in signs as she asked Lizardstrike for his confirmation, and he gave a firm nod, his jaw clenched.

"I know you don't want to believe it," Pineshade said, her intent amber eye finding Darkpelt's gaze as she spoke to him directly. "The Stars know that I didn't when I arrived at the Carrionplace and saw Dampfang trying to kill my brother. But, it happened."

Pineshade's gaze swept around to settle on Dampfang, and her entire body went taunt.

"Dampfang made his own nest," she rasped with a growl. "Now he must lie in it."

"Couldn't this be some kind of misunderstanding?" Marshnose

yowled, his gaze fixed on Sedgestar. "I'm not saying that Frostmask would *lie,* but I know that she never got along well with Dampfang. And, the others that were there are her friends— they'd back up her interpretation of events."

Bright outrage burst in Frostmask's chest, and she whipped her muzzle towards Marshnose.

"Why in StarClan's name would Autumnleap and I ever put our kits at risk like that?!" Frostmask spat. "Do you think all of us just *imagined* Dampfang stealing them from the nursery?!"

"I'm just saying that I want to understand the full version of events," Marshnose snapped, his tail lashing. "Your story doesn't make a whisker of sense! Why would the SkyClan deputy be so concerned with wanting to kill you?!"

Frostmask went so still for a moment, it felt like that even her heart might have forgotten to beat. But, it was a fair question. After Frostmask's actions had caused so much trouble for her Clan, her clan-mates deserved to know the true answer.

Feeling a bit like she was floating somewhere outside her body, watching herself move, Frostmask slowly rose to her paws to stand before ShadowClan.

"Because Paledusk is an evil cat who has done terrible things," she said, her clear voice ringing through the camp. "And, he is also my father. I threatened to expose him as such and tell the forest all of his crimes if he didn't leave ShadowClan alone. In retaliation, he worked with Dampfang to set this trap to silence me permanently."

Gasps of shock reverberated through the crowd. Frostmask's ears pricked in surprise to even see Dampfang's expression was stunned.

Did Paledusk not tell him that we were kin?

Frostmask gave her ears a small shake.

But, why would he? Paledusk wouldn't want to reveal a vulnerability like that to Dampfang. And, Paledusk would have seen that Dampfang hated me so much already— he needed no more reasons to want to kill

me.

Several different mutters rose up from the crowd as voiced talked over each other at once.

"No." "Is it really true?" "Frostmask's half-SkyClan?" "But Dampfang couldn't have done this."

"What?! How long have you known that the SkyClan deputy is your father?" Marshnose's yowl rang out above the rest. "Have you been conspiring with him?"

His gaze raked her pelt as sharp as claws. Despite all their testimony against Dampfang, Marshnose still did not want to accept that his former apprentice could have betrayed ShadowClan.

He's searching for a reason to blame me instead.

For a short moment, Frostmask's gaze met with Autumnleap's, and she saw his concern shining in his eyes. He opened his mouth as if to come up with an excuse to defend her, but Frostmask interrupted him before he could speak with a shake of her head.

No. No more lies.

Frostmask took a deep breath.

"I've been meeting with Paledusk for several moons," she confessed.

"See?! Traitor! Traitor!" Dampfang snarled.

"No!" Frostmask protested. "I was—"

Her voice was drowned out as more cats released yowls and meows of shock, echoing Dampfang. Some cats even spat furious hisses. Frostmask's belly clenched, and she cringed beneath the angry cries, the words she'd meant to say in her defense shriveling on her tongue. Her heartbeat started to hammer harder in her ears, taking on a frantic rhythm of panic.

Then a deafening yowl cut through the camp like a claw, silencing everyone at once. Frostmask's gaze flew to the source of the cry to

see Sedgestar glowering down at the camp, his fur bristling and tail lashing.

"Silence! Dampfang shall not speak again unless spoken to, and ShadowClan, you all will listen to me!" Sedgestar thundered. "The reason that Frostmask has been meeting with Paledusk is to collect valuable information for us to ultimately use against him and SkyClan."

Frostmask's stomach lurched in shock. She tried to catch Sedgestar's eye, but her leader wasn't looking at her. Rather, he was staring down at the camp with a steely gaze, as if waiting for someone to speak up and challenge him. But, no one did— hardly any cat moved a muscle at all, in fact— and as the clan stared at him in attention, Sedgestar calmed slightly, his fur flattening and tail stilling.

"Her actions received my approval," Sedgestar concluded firmly.

Frostmask's gaze widened. It... it wasn't *exactly* a lie since Sedgestar had decided to forgive her after she'd told him the truth about what she'd done. But, the way he said it now made it seem like she'd gotten his permission for everything beforehand.

He's defending me.

Frostmask blinked hard, her chest tightening as gratitude for Sedgestar suddenly gripped her.

"Wait— you knew Paledusk was her father this whole time?" Dampfang snarled incredulously, pulling Frostmask out of her thoughts. "And, that she was meeting with him?! *You're* a traitor too!"

Sedgestar shot Dampfang a look so searing, Frostmask was almost surprised that Dampfang's pelt didn't immediately catch abaze. But, Sedgestar didn't address him, instead after a heartbeat, he turned his gaze away from Dampfang, sweeping it over the Clan as he waited for the rest of their clan-mates to speak their opinion.

"What do my clan-mates have to say?" Sedgestar asked. "Do you

agree with the turncoat?"

No one shouted out in support of Dampfang, but confusion had descended over the clan like a fog. Marshnose blinked at Sedgestar a few times hard.

"Why... why didn't you tell us about Frostmask?" he asked.

"I didn't tell the Clan that Frostmask was half-SkyClan because she herself did not know that fact for many moons," Sedgestar said firmly. "I only told her once she was a warrior. I kept it a secret because I feared that her loyalty would be compromised if she knew she had family in SkyClan."

Sedgestar paused for a heartbeat, his jaw clenching. "But, I was wrong to doubt her. Her blood may be half-SkyClan, but her heart belongs to ShadowClan. Didn't she prove that beyond a shadow of a doubt today? She killed her SkyClan father with her own claws to save her ShadowClan clan-mates."

Frostmask's heart was in her throat. She swallowed hard, her eyes stinging. Sedgestar was more than just defending her; he was putting his neck on the line for her. He was taking responsibility for *everything,* even though she'd been disobeying him for moons.

Silence fell over the camp, not one cat tried arguing with Sedgestar. Sedgestar lifted his chin, his tail lashing behind him.

"Also," he continued, "her meetings were perilous missions. If Paledusk found out that she'd been spying on him, it would have put her in grave danger. It had to be kept a secret to prevent it from getting out and possibly getting back to Paledusk..."

Sedgestar's gaze shifted from the clan over to Dampfang, and he bared his fangs.

"And, it's a good thing it was a secret, since it seems we already have one turncoat in our midst," he spat.

Dampfang snarled back defiantly and drew himself up to his full height.

"I'm not the traitor to ShadowClan, Sedgestar. You are!" Dampfang yowled. "You've made us weak, putting this mixed-blood in charge, allowing rogue kits into the Clan! You've turned your back on our traditions, destroying the very foundation of what makes us ShadowClan— our warrior blood!"

"No!" Sedgestar's yowl silenced Dampfang. "What makes us ShadowClan is our loyalty to each other. Something that *you* have none of! You conspired with the SkyClan deputy against ShadowClan. You helped him plan an attack against us which got Hollowshade killed— a *loyal* ShadowClan warrior! And, you personally tried to kill your clan-mates and two kits! What kind of monster attempts to slaughter kittens!?"

Frostmask wasn't sure she'd ever seen Sedgestar so enraged. His teeth were bared, his pelt bristling, and his amber eyes were shining so brightly with righteous fury, it was as if a fire blazed inside him.

"I wouldn't—" Dampfang blustered, his ears twitching back a bit nervously as the eyes of the clan hardened against him. "Those aren't ShadowClan kits. They're a leech on our resources. But, I didn't harm them. I didn't know what Paledusk planned to do with them. And, I'd *never* harm ShadowClan kits."

Dampfang's gaze flickered over the crowd, but no cat was looking at him sympathetically anymore; not even Marshnose. Dampfang's former mentor was now staring at his own paws instead, his brow furrowed and troubled.

Dampfang's desperate eyes flew to Larkfoot.

"Mother," he said. "Tell them."

Frostmask glanced over at the queen. She was sitting outside the nursery right next to Dewleaf and Autumnleap. The three of them had barracked the entrance to the thorn bush with their bodies to protect the kits, and to try to prevent them from peering out and seeing or hearing what was going on. But, as Dampfang addressed her, Larkfoot flinched as if she'd been struck. She stared down at the ground, unable to meet Dampfang's eyes as she trembled like a leaf caught in a storm.

Dewleaf leaned towards her mother, swiping her tongue down her shoulder comfortingly and murmuring something to her. Without a word to Dampfang, Larkfoot rose to her paws, turned her back on him and slipped into the nursery.

Frostmask's head bowed in quiet respect for the queen. It had to be unspeakably difficult for her to reject her son... but Frostmask knew that Larkfoot loved every kitten in ShadowClan like she'd given birth to them herself. And, Dampfang had purposefully put Newtkit's and Mistkit's lives in danger.

I don't think she could ever forgive him for that.

Dampfang stared after his mother, his jaw hanging open in shock. Autumnleap and Dewleaf shifted over to block the nursery entrance and cut off any view Dampfang might have had of Larkfoot or the kits. Dampfang's gaze met Dewleaf's, and she stared back at him. Hurt and anger swam in Dewleaf's blue-green gaze, but she lifted her chin unwaveringly.

Dampfang didn't ask her for support. Her allegiances were clear.

Dampfang's gaze snapped from side to side, pelt beginning to prickle as he realized his allies were dwindling. Marshnose still wouldn't meet his gaze. Cedarfur looked like he'd been hit by a monster, his eyes glazed with stunned shock and grief.

Dustleap appeared similar. The intensity of the betrayal, pain, and disgust in his eyes at he stared at Dampfang nearly took Frostmask's breath away. Dustleap rose from where he'd been crouching with Cricketsong and Cedarfur over Hollowshade's body and stalked towards Dampfang stiff-legged.

"You killed my kit," Dustleap rasped.

As quick as a flash of lightning, one of his forepaws whipped towards Dampfang's face. Dampfang reeled back, droplets of fresh berry-bright blood welling in scratches lashed over his muzzle.

"You're worse than dead to me." Dustleap spat.

Dustleap returned to his family, and Sedgestar didn't reprimand him

for attacking Dampfang. He didn't even say anything at all as Dampfang swiped the blood from his muzzle. Dampfang's gaze continued to scour the crowd. There was still one cat left for him to appeal to— the cat who'd loved and supported him the most out of anyone his whole life.

Dampfang's eyes found Darkpelt. The elder was sitting stiff and still, his face a stony mask. As Dampfang's gaze met with his, Darkpelt's expression didn't change, remaining totally unreadable.

"Father," Dampfang gasped. *"Please."*

Darkpelt slowly rose to his feet, and Frostmask realized that although his face was hard and unfeeling, his paws were trembling.

"You're no son of mine," Darkpelt growled, his voice breaking over the words.

He turned his face away, and Dampfang inhaled sharply, his ears pinning against his skull. Up on Clanrock, Sedgestar's chin and tail lifted high in a demonstration of his power. Dampfang's challenge against Sedgestar's leadership had failed. No cat would support him. Not even his own father.

"Dampfang," Sedgestar growled, his voice low but echoing all throughout camp. "For your crimes against ShadowClan, you are no longer worthy of the title 'warrior,' nor are you worthy of ShadowClan's protection or our ancestors' guidance. I strip you of your warrior name and sentence you to exile. Wander where you wish, but the light of Silverpelt will not follow you, and no clan will ever welcome you again."

The newly nameless cat crouched down beneath the barrage of Sedgestar's words, creeping backwards slowly. His eyes stretched so wide, a ring of white could be made out around the green.

"If you are caught on our territory after today, you will be treated as the rogue you are," Sedgestar growled, his lips curling back so every fang was on full display. "Leave. *Now."*

Without a moment more of hesitation, Dampfang turned tail and

fled.

"Rowanheart, Kestrelmoon, Snakeeyes," Sedgestar ordered. "Track him and ensure he leaves our territory. Clan meeting dismissed."

The three cats leapt to their paws and raced out of camp, hot on Dampfang's heels.

Frostmask sagged as Dampfang left. It was as if she'd been straining against some great gale, but the winds had all at once died out. Now all she felt was drained.

Judging by the expressions of her clan-mates, she wasn't the only cat who felt that way. Even though Sedgestar had dismissed the meeting, cats were slow to disperse from the clearing. Darkpelt stood in stunned silence. Marshnose looked lost and confused. And, Pineshade was staring at the thorn tunnel with a hollow gaze as if she was still watching Dampfang flee. Frostmask heaved herself to her paws and padded over to her friend. She gently bunted her head against Pineshade's black furred shoulder, finally snapping her attention off the barrier.

"Hey. You okay?" Frostmask asked.

Pineshade blinked once.

"I will be," she said softly.

Murmurstep came padding over from behind Frostmask. She didn't say anything to Pineshade as her long, pale golden fur brushed against her dark pelt, but her gaze was sympathetic. Pineshade leaned against the taller she-cat's side and sighed.

"Frostmask," Sedgestar called.

Sedgestar had descended to the base of Clanrock and seemed to be waiting for her. Frostmask nodded goodbye to her friends, turning away from them just as Pineshade's tail twined around Murmurstep's.

Frostmask plodded over to her leader, her wounds seeming to protest more fiercely than before.

"We still have much to discuss about Paledusk and SkyClan," Sedgestar reminded her, his amber gaze stern.

Frostmask nodded, swallowing. Sedgestar may have decided to be merciful towards her, but she had a lot left to explain about what she and Paledusk had exchanged during their meetings— and, what ShadowClan's plan was now that he was dead on their territory.

"Yes, we do. But..." Frostmask hesitated for a heartbeat, summoning her courage. "But, can that wait a little bit? I need to clean my wounds, and I'd really like to check in on Mistkit and Newtkit. I want to make sure they are doing okay after... after everything."

Sedgestar blinked, and his eyes softened a fraction.

"I understand," he said quietly. "We will talk later."

Home

As they walked, discomfort and anxiety crawled through Frostmask's pelt like a whole clan of fleas. No matter how she tried to keep her attention on the forest ahead, her focus kept drifting to the ragged white form that Sedgestar and Elmclaw dragged between them.

They were on their way to Fourtrees to meet with Fennelstar and his medicine cat— although this hadn't even been their only meeting arranged that day. ShadowClan had been busy the day after the ambush, dealing with the fallout. This morning, Sedgestar and Elmclaw had made a trip to ThunderClan to meet with Morningstar and explain Paledusk's and Dampfang's role in manufacturing the hostilities between their two clans. Frostmask had been unable to go to that meeting since she had other important matters to attend to, but afterwards, Sedgestar had seemed cautiously optimistic about Morningstar believing him.

Now they were meeting with SkyClan's leader to explain what had happened with Paledusk and Frostmask during yesterday's attack.

Frostmask's hunch was that Fennelstar would have no idea about his deputy's plot to kill her. She suspected that he'd be just as stunned by the news of that as he would be at the sight of Paledusk's dead body.

Frostmask couldn't help but wince at the thought herself. They had retrieved Paledusk's corpse from the Carrionplace yesterday evening, but the rats had already gotten to him. Between that, and the smell, and his bloody, dirty fur, he hardly resembled the pristine, almost untouchable— *unstoppable*— warrior he'd been. He seemed so much weaker and duller now. No matter how powerful Paledusk had been in life, in death, the vermin had still gnawed at

him.

Frostmask tried to take comfort in that.

I'm alive. I won.

She'd saved her kits and avenged May, and Salt, and Swoopstrike, and any other cat Paledusk had hurt.

So then why did victory feel so empty and exhausting?

Frostmask lengthened her stride to move in front of Sedgestar and Elmclaw and put Paledusk out of her range of sight. Because of that, she was the first in the ShadowClan patrol to enter Fourtrees. The setting sun just grazed the horizon, casting the clearing before her in long shadows. But, she still easily spotted Fennelstar and his medicine cat, Swallowfur, accompanied by an escort of Suneyes and Larchtail on the far side of the hollow, waiting beneath the Great Oak closest to their territory. They were on time, here at the gathering dusk as promised.

Frostmask's lips parted, and she drew the air over her tongue, searching for any other scents.

Is he coming?

She could detect nothing on the breeze besides the scents of the four SkyClan cats ahead of her. Frostmask snapped back to attention as Sedgestar and Elmclaw padded out of the undergrowth behind her with their burden. Together, their group advanced towards the SkyClan cats. The SkyClan patrol did the same and the two clans met in the shade of the Great Rock, a tense few fox-lengths between them. For a moment, everyone was silent.

Frostmask took the chance to study the SkyClan cats. Suneyes had fresh wounds on her pelt— she must have been involved on the attack yesterday— but Larchtail was unmarked. Fennelstar wasn't injured either, but the elderly leader continued to be in poor health. His pelt was patchy, his paws seemed to have a constant tremor, and his eyes were bloodshot.

His illness though, didn't stop his gaze from being hard and furious

as Sedgestar and Elmclaw dropped Paledusk's body to the ground. Fennelstar hissed wordlessly, his tail lashing.

"Thank you for meeting us, Fennelstar," Sedgestar began, ignoring the other leader's hostility. "We've generously retrieved your deputy's body for you, although I think you will be surprised to learn where and how he died."

"I don't need any explanations when the murderers are standing right in front of me!" Fennelstar spat, his ears pinned back against his head.

Frostmask couldn't stop herself from flinching, although she knew that Fennelstar had no way of knowing that it had been her very claws which struck the lethal blow.

"Calm yourself. We've come to have a discussion, Fennelstar," Elmclaw said with a warning growl. "That's why Sedgestar brought me and requested you to bring Swallowfur as well— we aren't here to fight."

"And, why would I trust you over Sedgestar?" Fennelstar sneered. "You may be a medicine cat, but you're still a *ShadowClan* cat."

"Then I will give you a simple reason to listen to what we have to say," Sedgestar growled, resting a paw on Paledusk's shoulder. "You will listen, or you will not get Paledusk's body back to perform his death ceremony in full."

Fennelstar growled furiously, but Sedgestar just nodded at Frostmask, sending every cats' attention flying to her. "Go ahead, Frostmask."

Frostmask lifted her chin, focusing her gaze on Fennelstar. She didn't want to look at Larchtail's— her friend's— expression as she explained why she'd killed her clan-mate.

"The cat you knew as your deputy was not the cat that Paledusk truly was," Frostmask began the words she'd rehearsed with Sedgestar steadily. "Paledusk was a hypocrite and a murderer. He took a rogue— my mother— as his mate and fathered me. When my

mother and I were starving, she tried to shelter us in SkyClan, but he drove her away. He would rather let his mate and his kits die than damage his reputation. Yesterday, Paledusk made the choice again to put his reputation above the lives of other cats. I threatened to tell everyone the truth I found out about him, if he didn't leave me and ShadowClan alone. In response, Paledusk worked with a traitor within ShadowClan to attempt to kill me and my kits—"

"What?! *Slander.* Lies—!" Fennelstar began to splutter, his eyes blazing.

"But these weren't even the only times Paledusk attacked his kin!" Frostmask said, raising her voice to shout over the SkyClan leader. "Seasons ago, Paledusk attempted to murder Slatewhisker— his own clan-mate and brother!"

"That's *not* true!" Suneyes cut in, her claws tearing at the grass beneath her. "Slatewhisker was killed by rogues, and Paledusk was a noble warrior!"

"Paledusk is not worthy of the title 'warrior,'" Sedgestar growled.

"And, the crimes I've told you are only his most grievous," Frostmask continued, trying hard to get the rest of the words out before the SkyClan cats could cut her off again. "They don't account for how he's meddled in each of the clans' affairs— turning us against one another however it suited him. He attempted to manipulate and control every cat around him. I thought I could play his own game; I thought I could control him with *his* secrets. But, when he attacked us yesterday, I— I... I had no choice but to stop him once and for all."

Frostmask's voice faltered for the first time as she finished speaking, but she took a steadying breath and held her ground as she looked at the SkyClan cats. They were all staring at her disbelievingly— even Larchtail and the medicine cat. Fennelstar's tail whipped as he worked himself up into a rage.

"You've got some nerve," Fennelstar snarled, spittle flying from his jaws. "Thinking you can waltz up here, having murdered my

deputy, then spew these *lies—"*

"She's telling the truth," a new, deep voice rumbled.

The undergrowth rustled, and a large cat emerged from the deepening shadows. His massive white and grey-tabby striped paws padded heavily on the ground as he walked into the Fourtrees' clearing. His one green eye was locked on Fennelstar, and the blue and yellow collar around his neck jingled softly with every step. Relief flooded through Frostmask at the sight of him, and a quiet purr of greeting rose in her throat.

Fennelstar stared at the tom, his expression still locked in a snarl, while Suneyes' shoulders hunched, her pelt bristling out menacingly. But, then stunned recognition crept across her face.

Suneyes recoiled a step with a hiss of shock as Salt padded up to Frostmask's side.

"...Slatewhisker?!" she asked in an incredulous rasp.

Salt stared at her, his gaze hard. Swallowfur gaped while Larchtail muffled a gasp. Frostmask glanced over to her friend and saw her staring wide-eyed at Salt.

Fennelstar blinked, his ears twisting back in an expression that was both confused and disturbed as recollection also dawned in his eyes.

"Slatewhisker?" Fennelstar echoed with an uneasy growl. "But... You're dead."

"Clearly not," Salt said coldly, lifting his paw to touch it to the scarred part of his face. "Despite Paledusk's best efforts."

Larchtail managed to tear her gaze off of her long-lost father to look at Frostmask, her disbelief draining away to be replaced with shock and horror.

You found him? He's alive?! Her expression seemed to ask. *But Paledusk really tried to kill him?!*

Frostmask gave her a tiny nod, wishing she could brush her pelt

against hers reassuringly and explain everything that had happened that day when she'd went into the twoleg-place. Thankfully, Swallowfur seemed to have noticed Larchtail's distress, and the medicine cat draped her tail over her back.

"But..." Fennelstar rasped, his brow still furrowed in disbelief.

"It's as Frostmask said," Salt growled. "Paledusk attacked me when we were young warriors, intent on murdering me. He would have succeeded if twolegs had not found me and managed to save my life with their healers."

"And that's why you've been gone?" Fennelstar asked, his gaze dropping from Salt's face down to his collar. "You became a kittypet to hide from Paledusk?"

Salt shook his head.

"No. I became a kittypet to be with my mate. I was leaving SkyClan the day Paledusk attacked me," he rumbled.

Larchtail took a seat heavily, looking even more stunned. However, Fennelstar's eyes narrowed in disgust at his admission, and the look did not go unnoticed by Salt.

Salt's expression hardened.

"What? Do you think I deserved to be *murdered* for wanting to leave SkyClan?" Salt spat.

"...Perhaps not," Fennelstar rumbled finally in a low voice. "But Paledusk's feelings of anger and betrayal at his brother abandoning his Clan are reasonable."

Salt snarled like a lion, his tail lashing in a frenzy.

"His feelings of betrayal?! *He* betrayed *me!"* Salt spat. "He was my brother and my best friend, and he decided he wanted to kill me!"

Salt's green eye welled with sudden emotion, sparing a fraction of a moment to glance at the slumped form of Paledusk's corpse.

"But that's just how Paledusk was," Salt growled. "You might think he was your best friend, but he'd never feel the same. Paledusk wasn't friends with you. He just *owned* you. At least that's how he saw it."

Salt tore his gaze away from Paledusk's body, his lips curling into a grimace that seemed equal parts grief and disgust. "My brother was a monster. And, it's better for everyone now that he's dead."

Utter silence fell over the clearing after Salt's outburst. Salt sunk his claws into the ground, his shoulders tense and his paws trembling slightly. Frostmask touched her tail-tip to his flank, trying to comfort him. Salt was silent for a moment, but as his trembling faded, he managed to lift his gaze back to his former leader.

"Don't think you escaped him unscathed either, Fennelstar," Salt said in a low voice, his gaze drifting over Fennelstar's ragged pelt and bony figure. "You look like you haven't been well recently."

Fennelstar's pale brown fur bristled defensively.

"Let me guess— this odd illness showed no response to any of the herbs you used to treat it?" Salt asked, his gaze flickering to Swallowfur.

Swallowfur opened her mouth, her brow furrowed, but Fennelstar didn't give her the chance to respond.

"I have been sick, but I don't see how this is relevant to anything, Slatewhisker," Fennelstar hissed.

"It has more to do than you think," Salt snapped, his pelt bristling too. "I can smell it on your breath— the twoleg poison. After spending so many seasons in the twoleg-place, I've gotten quite good at identifying the scent— even when it's coming from a creature that is still alive. Paledusk would have known it too."

Frostmask's stomach twisted, icy shock trickling through her veins. She opened her jaws, inhaling deeply. Salt was right. There on the breeze, there was a faint trace of a familiar sour scent...

Even Fennelstar's tough demeanor cracked, his eyes widening as a

look of horror crept over his face.

"...What?" he croaked.

"Did my brother often bring you your fresh-kill?" Salt asked, his intelligent green eye narrowing. "Although why wouldn't you accept it from him? He was your deputy, and you wouldn't be able to tell that there was anything wrong with it. Of course, Paledusk was careful, and he could be patient too. He likely wouldn't bring you prey that was so full of poison that it'd kill you all at once. But a tiny amount each time, even just twice or thrice a moon— minor enough to make it seem like you're ill instead of poisoned, and then he'd just sit back and watch your lives trickle away."

Fennelstar, Suneyes, Larchtail, and Swallowfur all stared at Salt with wide eyes, looking too stunned to speak.

"The good news is, if that is indeed the case, I expect you'll start feeling much better soon as the poison works its way from your body," Salt concluded, giving his tail-tip a dismissive flick. "That is, of course, as long as it didn't cause permanent damage."

As the group of SkyClan cats remained shocked into silence, Sedgestar took the opportunity to step forward, his tail lifting commandingly.

"As you can see, Frostmask has done you a massive favor in killing Paledusk and exposing him for the traitorous snake he was," Sedgestar said, addressing Fennelstar. "She's not only saved your life, but also stopped your entire clan from falling into his bloody claws. You should be grateful."

Fennelstar blinked hard as if pulling himself from a daze— or a nightmare. His expression was still slack with shock, but his gaze managed to focus in on Frostmask.

"...Yes," he whispered.

Their testimonies must have finally gotten through to him, since the leader's expression had completely transformed in the past few moments. He'd gone from his pelt bristling out and hissing defiantly

to his shoulders hunched and his eyes dull.

Frostmask's gaze skimmed over him. Paledusk had truly done a number on him— Fennelstar seemed like a shadow of his former self. His large frame had shrunken in, and with his bony sides and hollow, bloodshot eyes, he looked far more like an ailing elder than the powerful and fierce leader of SkyClan she'd once thought him to be.

"I am still... *stunned* that one of my own warriors could have done such a thing. But, the evidence at this point seems overwhelming," Fennelstar admitted.

Larchtail and Swallowfur echoed him with quiet murmurs of shock. Even Suneyes dipped her head in concession, although a storm of conflict raged across her expression. It looked like despite the fact that she was starting to believe them too, a part of her was still mourning for Paledusk.

Sedgestar nodded down towards Paledusk's body.

"You can do with him what you like. Take him home, hold a proper death ceremony. Or strip him of his name and leave him for the crows to pick clean. I don't care. But, best not leave him rotting here in Fourtrees," he said.

Fennelstar was quiet for a moment as he deliberated, his gaze drifting to Swallowfur as if asking her for advice. After a few moments of silent conversing with his medicine cat, Fennelstar gave a small nod.

"We'll take him back to camp," he finally decided. "I don't know about a death ceremony... But Birdstrike at least deserves a chance to say goodbye to her son."

Swallowfur and Suneyes moved to pick up Paledusk's body, but Sedgestar placed his paw on it again before they could, clearing his throat lightly.

"Before you go, one more thing," Sedgestar said. "I presume that you'd prefer it if the other Clans didn't know about Paledusk's

traitorous actions... and the major lapse in judgment you showed when you chose him as your deputy."

Fennelstar's fur bristled, a bit of fire returning to his eyes.

"You *presume* correctly," he growled. "What of it?"

"Then I propose an agreement," Sedgestar said, his tail flicking. "At the gathering, ShadowClan will remain silent about the truth of Paledusk's death. I will still announce the treachery of the cat formerly named Dampfang, but I will make it sound as if he was working alone. You can announce Paledusk's death at the fangs of a fox, or a dog, or whatever you wish. You can even tell that to your own that clan-mates, if you want— that's your business. But, in exchange, let us also announce peace between our clans. SkyClan must be as weary of all this fighting as ShadowClan is. So, no more claw-for-claw, fang-for-fang... Let's put an end to it."

Fennelstar was still and silent for several heartbeats. The only sign that he was considering Sedgestar's words were the narrowing of his eyes.

"From your own mouth, you said that you owe Frostmask a debt of gratitude for exposing Paledusk's treachery and stopping him before he could cause more harm," Sedgestar pointed out as his silence stretched on. "Surely, that's worth something. Promise us an end to this fighting, and help both our clans."

"How can I trust ShadowClan to remain quiet about Paledusk?" Fennelstar growled.

Sedgestar seemed to almost purr, his whiskers twitching smugly. "Really, Fennelstar? You should know better than to question if ShadowClan can keep a secret."

Fennelstar just grunted, unamused, before falling quiet again.

"And what about ThunderClan?" he asked finally, his brow furrowing. "I see no path to peace as long as you remain allies with them. I am thankful to Frostmask, yes, but you can't ask us to end our war with you *and* with them as well. I'll admit, historically at

least, SkyClan and ShadowClan have little reason to fight. But, generations of SkyClan blood has been spilled at ThunderClan's claws."

Sedgestar paused for a moment, blinking thoughtfully as he considered it.

"I can't promise anything before I speak to Morningstar," Sedgestar said. "But, perhaps it's time for ShadowClan to stand alone— without allies— once more. ThunderClan recently paid a debt, fulfilling the terms of an agreement. I see no reason for ShadowClan to prolong our deal with them."

And, ThunderClan is much stronger now than they were last green-leaf, while SkyClan is weaker with Paledusk dead and an ill leader, Frostmask realized, understanding the reasoning Sedgestar left unsaid.

ThunderClan will be able to stand against SkyClan on their own.

Frostmask felt a flicker of admiration for her leader's cunning— and his compassion. He would be able to secure peace for ShadowClan, but it wouldn't come at ThunderClan's expense.

"Then speak with Morningstar, and let me know before the gathering," Fennelstar said. "But, I will promise you this: if ShadowClan ends their alliance with ThunderClan, there will be peace between our clans."

Sedgestar nodded, his amber eyes warm with pleasure.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "You will be hearing from me soon."

Fennelstar gave a curt nod and turned aside as Sedgestar finally stepped back from Paledusk's body. But, then Fennelstar hesitated for a moment, glancing back at Salt.

"Would you like to journey with us to camp?" Fennelstar grunted. "It may be easier for Birdstrike if when she finds out she lost one son, she is reunited with her other."

Salt paused for a heartbeat, his eye widening with surprise at

Fennelstar's offer. But, then he gave his head a small shake and dropped his gaze.

"Thank you for the invitation, but no," he muttered.

Fennelstar bristled.

"Well you better not think it's a standing offer!" Fennelstar snapped. "This is your only chance. I won't have you padding in and out of camp whenever you like, Slatewhisker."

Salt's ears twisted back, and his gaze hardened.

"Actually, my name's Salt now," he growled in an icy voice. "And you don't have to worry about that. That part of my life is dead, and my home is the twoleg-place."

Fennelstar snorted. "Suit yourself."

Fennelstar turned away again, but he still didn't yet depart from Fourtrees.

"There is one more matter to attend to," he rumbled.

His gaze flickered to Suneyes.

"Suneyes, will you be the next deputy of SkyClan?" he asked.

Suneyes bright golden gaze widened with shock.

"What? *Me?"* she asked.

"Did I stutter?" Fennelestar growled. "Yes, you. I know that Paledusk had been your mentor, but I trust that you learned only from his strength and not from his treachery."

"Of course, Fennelstar," Suneyes meowed quickly, lifting her chin. "I am loyal only to you and to SkyClan."

Fennelstar gave her a curt nod. "Good. We will announce it when we return."

As Swallowfur and Suneyes prepared to grab Paledusk's body,

Frostmask took the chance to quickly slip over to Larchtail.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't tell you about any of this before," Frostmask muttered, her gaze lowered to the ground apologetically. "A lot of it I only found it out recently myself. There were so many lies to untangle... I didn't even know what was true until the very end."

"But you did find the truth." Frostmask glanced up to see Larchtail openly staring at Salt. "Find *him*. I still can't believe he's alive. And, a kittypet!"

"It must be strange for you," Frostmask said sympathetically.

"It is," Larchtail admitted before glancing at Frostmask. "But, it's a lot stranger to hear all this about Paledusk. I would have never thought..." Larchtail blinked hard, shaking her head. "I mean, it's true that he had been running the clan single-pawed for the past couple of moons. But, what else is a deputy supposed to do if their leader is sick?"

"...Hopefully Fennelstar will recover now," Frostmask said, trying to hide her touch of hesitation.

She had no fondness for Fennelstar, but she wasn't sure if she trusted Suneyes as deputy or interim-leader all that much either.

And Fennelstar, at least, has agreed to peace.

Larchtail nodded.

"Yes, and it will be good to have some peace between our clans for once," she added, as if her thoughts had followed the same paths as Frostmask's. Larchtail studied Frostmask with a curious gaze. "Especially since now I know we're kin."

Suneyes loudly cleared her throat, glaring back at Larchtail from where she and the others in the SkyClan patrol waited for her at the tree-line.

"Oops. I better go." Larchtail hastily dipped her head to Frostmask. "See you at the gathering."

Without another word, Larchtail bounded away. Frostmask turned back to her clan-mates and was pleased to see that Salt was still here too, albeit standing several tail-lengths away from Elmclaw and Sedgestar. He shifted his weight from paw-to-paw, a bit uncomfortable around the clan-cats.

Frostmask padded back over to them, and Sedgestar met her gaze. His face was tired— he was still recuperating from his injuries and the strain of losing two lives yesterday— but his eyes glittered with satisfaction.

"That went well," he declared before politely nodding to Salt. "Thank you, for your assistance with it."

"It was nothing," Salt muttered, avoiding Sedgestar's eyes. "I owe far more favors than just this to May. It's the least I could do for her kit."

Sedgestar just nodded again before looking at Frostmask. "I've decided that Elmclaw and I will go to ThunderClan to speak with Morningstar again and report about Fennelstar's response right away. But, you should head home. There's a lot to attend to at camp."

Frostmask blinked. Sedgestar was right— ShadowClan was still recovering from a vicious attack. They might have gotten ThunderClan and SkyClan off their backs, but many cats were still injured, including Frostmask herself.

They also still had Rabbitstar to contend with... Would WindClan try attacking them again, even without SkyClan to back them up? And, only StarClan knew where Willowstar stood with all this.

And yet— Frostmask's paws only dragged with reluctance at the thought of going back to camp.

Couldn't she just have another moment more with Salt? There was so much to do, *all the time,* she hardly felt like she had an instant to breathe, let alone be with her family.

"Yes, but perhaps I should first escort Salt to the border with

twoleg-place?" Frostmask asked, blinking at Sedgestar hopefully. "It's been seasons since he's last been here. He probably doesn't remember the territories all that well."

Honestly, Frostmask wasn't sure if that was strictly true— Salt had found his way alone to Fourtrees, after all. Sedgestar seemed to think so as well because he hesitated, his eyes narrowing.

"I would appreciate the escort," Salt rumbled, gazing at Sedgestar solemnly. "I'm as hopeless as a moonstruck hare when it comes to directions."

Frostmask glanced at Salt gratefully, and Sedgestar huffed out a brief sigh.

"Alright," he said.

Frostmask padded up to Salt's side, resisting her urge to purr.

"We'll go through ShadowClan territory," she said as she and Salt followed Sedgestar and Elmclaw away from Fourtrees. "That means it will be a bit farther for you— you'll have to loop around the outer edge of ThunderClan to head to the twoleg-place. But, I don't want to take you straight through ThunderClan territory and almost start a new war."

Frostmask and Salt parted from Elmclaw and Sedgestar when they got close to the thunderpath. The leader and medicine cat headed from there towards the ThunderClan camp, while Frostmask and Salt crossed the thunderpath and traced the edge of it along the ShadowClan border.

Although Frostmask had been eager to spend more time with Salt, she found herself slipping into a quiet, introspective melancholy as they walked. Birds twittered in the pine branches above her, and as the dusk strengthened, the quiet songs of crickets rose to replace them. The only sound beyond that as they padded on was the occasional roar of a monster down the thunderpath.

But, the inside of Frostmask's mind was loud and busy. Thoughts and worries about ShadowClan, her kits, and Paledusk continued to

swirl.

She dearly hoped that the clan and her kits would be able to bounce back after yesterday's events. Hollowshade's death was a heavy blow to ShadowClan, but they had lost warriors before and recovered. Dampfang's treachery, though, was something unheard of, and had badly shaken the Clan's confidence. Although in the end, all her clan-mates had chosen Sedgestar and ShadowClan over Dampfang, Frostmask wasn't so naive to think that everything would be easy from now on. Some cats had a renewed distrust for her because of the revelation of her connection to SkyClan. She would once again have to work twice as hard to prove herself a worthy deputy to them. At least things were looking a bit more peaceful in the forest now with the hesitant truce agreements with SkyClan and ThunderClan.

But then, where would all this leave her kits? They were young, but not so young that they would forget what had happened to them—one of their clan-mates, a cat they'd trusted, put their lives in danger. They'd watched their parents struggle, and fight, and *kill* cats right in front of them. How would they recover from something that?

Frostmask felt a pang in her chest.

*How can **I** recover from that?*

Her paws were white again, but every time she licked them, she still tasted blood.

Bile rose in the back of Frostmask's throat again.

"You're quiet," Salt commented, pulling her out of her grim thoughts.

Frostmask's ears slanted back as she glanced at him from the corners of her eyes.

"I have a lot on my mind," she admitted.

Salt nodded once, unsurprised.

"But here I thought that you wanted to escort me to the border so that we could visit," he said, a light, teasing note in his voice.

Frostmask huffed out a brief purr of laughter. "I did. I mean, I *do*. But..."

Salt came to a stop, so Frostmask did as well. She turned to look at him directly, and his intelligent green eye studied her face.

"You're upset," he said. "Let's talk about it?"

Frostmask blinked once, unsure, but Salt turned and padded over to a nearby fallen log. He sprung onto it and took a seat, swiping his tail over the trunk next to him invitingly.

"I've got time," he said. "As long as I'm back before dawn, Pepper won't worry."

Frostmask thought that Sedgestar likely wouldn't be as lenient, but she still took Salt's invitation and leapt onto the log to sit beside him. Salt was silent for a moment, grooming his chest fur.

"So what's bothering you?" he asked finally.

Frostmask's brow furrowed, her thoughts turning back to Paledusk.

"I don't know," she sighed. "I don't know how to explain it, but some of it... is Paledusk." She paused for a moment, licking her lips nervously. "I know he was a terrible cat. I'm relieved that he's gone. But at the same time, I—"

She hesitated again, conflict clawing at her chest. But, Salt's eye was patient as he gazed at her, silently encouraging her on.

"I feel—" she began again, each word halting, *"—bad* that he's dead. I feel bad that I killed him..." She swallowed hard around the lump that was forming in her throat. "Does that make me bad too?"

Salt let out a quiet huff, shaking his head. "No, Frostmask. In fact, I'm pretty sure that makes you *good.* Only a cat like Paledusk would snuff out a life and feel nothing about it."

"I know I had to do it," Frostmask muttered, flexing her claws into the wood beneath her. "He left me no choice. But, I still feel awful."

"I know," Salt soothed, his tail sweeping out to brush against her side. "When you came to me this morning and told me what had happened, I thought I'd be glad that he was dead too. After everything he did to me, and how he's haunted my nightmares ever since, what else could I feel now that he's gone? But then I saw his body and... and I wasn't happy."

Salt's expression tightened, and he looked away from Frostmask to stare out into the forest.

"I don't think he had to be this way, you know?" Salt whispered. "He chose to be selfish. But, there was a time that he wasn't always like that."

"I never knew him then," Frostmask said softly.

Salt was silent for several long heartbeats before he finally looked at Frostmask again.

"This isn't the only thing troubling you, is it?" he asked.

Frostmask sighed and shook her head.

"I'm worried about a lot of things," she confessed, "but my kits the most. They shouldn't have had to experience all *this*. Especially so young. I'm their mother. I should have protected them better."

"You did protect them. You *saved* them," Salt said, soft but insistent.

"I know," Frostmask blinked hard, her eyes suddenly stinging. "But, I'm scared they will be frightened of everything— and everyone— now. A clan-mate that they trusted tried to kill them."

"Kits are stronger than you think. They'll bounce back, especially with you and your mate caring for them," Salt said.

"With what time?" Frostmask asked with a bitter scoff.

She tilted her head back to stare up at the pine boughs above her

head. "I've barely had a single conversation with my kits since the attack yesterday. The most time I have with them is at night—when they're already sleeping."

"Does your mate not do a good enough job caring for them?" Salt asked in concern.

Frostmask shook her ears.

"That's not it. Autumnleap does a *great* job," she said. "I just want to be there for them too. But, my clan needs me there as their deputy, especially right now when we are in such a delicate place. Sedgestar and my other clan-mates are relying on me."

Frostmask heaved a sigh, closing her eyes for a beat. "I feel torn."

"I know the feeling," Salt muttered.

Frostmask opened her eyes and glanced at him then. His brow was furrowed and pensive as he frowned out at the clan territory that surrounded them as if remembering his own time in the forest.

"...How did you know what was best for you?" Frostmask asked quietly. "When you decide to leave SkyClan?"

"It wasn't easy," Salt said, his ears flattening. "And, it wasn't a decision I made all at once. It was a building up of little things, little pains, until they reached a breaking point."

Salt frowned, his tail swishing.

"I hurt a lot of cats when I did it, and I'm sorry for hurting them. But, I never regretted leaving. I know there are some cats—" Salt twitched a ragged ear. "Or *many* cats, if I'm being honest, that would decry me as selfish for it."

Salt sighed and shook his broad head. "And, maybe I am selfish. But, one day I suddenly realized that I couldn't keep living *my* life for everyone else. I had to do what made me happy and stop caring about what everyone else wanted."

Frostmask lowered her eyes, her pelt prickling. Salt's tail gently

brushed under her chin, lifting her gaze back to his.

"So Frostmask, what I think you need to ask yourself is: What do *you* want?"

Frostmask swallowed hard, silent and still for a moment before she leaned over and burrowed her face in the long fur of Salt's ruff. After a moment of silent surprise, Salt began to purr, and Frostmask's own purr rose in response.

"Thank you for listening, and for what you said. That helps," she said, pulling away. "And Salt... I don't think you're selfish."

He blinked at her gently. "That's kind of you to say."

Frostmask paused for a beat as she considered her next words, hoping she wasn't overstepping.

"But if you do ever want to try to make some amends..." she began hesitantly. "Now that Paledusk isn't in the way, there are cats in SkyClan that might enjoy talking to you. Birdstrike misses you a lot. Her memories are bad now, but that much is still obvious. And Larchtail— one of the cats that we just met with— is one of your kits with Doepelt. She's a good cat, and I think she'd want to get to know you... Maybe you'd want to get to know her too."

Salt's ears angled back uneasily.

"Even if I'm a kittypet?" he asked.

Frostmask nodded, and Salt exhaled slowly.

"Well, maybe you're right. I'll try to reach out and see if they are receptive to it," Salt said. "I'm at least glad that I got to see you again, Frostmask, and I hope this won't be the last time. You know you and your family are always welcome to visit me and Pepper."

Frostmask purred at the mental image of herding Autumnleap and their kits through the twoleg place. Now *that* would be an adventure.

"I think I'd like that, one day when the kits are older," she said.

Salt nodded.

"And you know too, if this—" He pointed his muzzle to indicate everything around her. "—ever gets to be too much for you, like it was for me, my home is always open. If you'd like to stay more permanently."

"I appreciate the offer," Frostmask murmured. "But, this..."

She lifted her gaze, sweeping it over the soaring pines, their dark trunks and the verdant needles. The chorus of croaking frogs filled her ears, interspersed with chirps of crickets, and the heady scent of ShadowClan rushed into her nose. She closed her eyes for a moment, just breathing it in.

"This is my home. I'm not completely sure what I want right now... But I at least know that."

"I understand," Salt meowed softly. He sprung down from the log. "I better let you get back to it then. I think I can find my own way home from here."

Frostmask followed him down and stretched up on her toes to touch her nose to his in goodbye.

"Thank you, Salt," she murmured.

"Goodbye, Frostmask," he said.

With a final friendly blink, Salt turned and padded off into the woods.

Frostmask had plenty of time to think on her way home from speaking with Salt, and she found the camp dark and quiet when she finally arrived back. Many cats were already in their dens, sleeping, but the flicker of Elmclaw's tail disappearing into the cave beneath Clanrock told her that he and Sedgestar were back from their meeting with ThunderClan. Knowing her leader was here, Frostmask headed straight for his den before she could lose her nerve.

"Sedgestar?" she called from outside the roots.

"Come in," Sedgestar's voice echoed out from the earthen tunnel.

She padded inside to see that Sedgestar was alone in his nest, blinking blearily like she'd woken him from sleep. Frostmask felt just as weary as Sedgestar looked, but her leader still made the effort to lift his chin from the mossy nest as she took a seat inside.

"Hello, Frostmask. Are you here with reports of anymore disasters I need to deal with?" he asked drily.

Frostmask purred faintly, but her ears angled back. "Unfortunately sir... I am. There is one more thing."

Sedgestar rose to a proper sit, his ears flattening.

"That was a *joke,* Frostmask. You weren't supposed to say 'yes.'" He gave a small sigh, shaking his head. "What is it?"

Frostmask lowered her gaze to the mossy ground.

"It's— uh— it's about me. I was thinking... Well..." Frostmask took a deep breath and braced herself before forcing the words out. "I want to resign as deputy. I just want to be a normal warrior again."

Sedgestar was silent, prompting Frostmask to look back over at him. He was staring at her with a furrowed brow and amber eyes that shone with surprise.

"Is this because of what happened with Paledusk?" he asked. "I thought I made it clear that I'd still like you to be deputy regardless."

"I know," Frostmask said quietly. "And, I'm so grateful for that. But, this isn't about what happened with Paledusk— not exactly. It's just about me, and I don't want it."

Sedgestar blinked hard, not comprehending.

"I never wanted it. When you asked me to be deputy, I accepted because felt like I *had* to," Frostmask said, her voice soft as she explained. "I wanted to prove my loyalty to you and our clan-mates. I wanted show that I am loyal to only ShadowClan." Frostmask

shook her head. "I think I've spent my entire life trying to prove myself to someone— my peers, or Swoopstrike, the other warriors, or you... But I haven't had any doubts about where I belong in a long time. It's here. I just don't feel like I need to prove it to myself or anyone anymore. I just want to live a normal life in ShadowClan — with my friends, my mate, and my kits. My kits need me, especially after what they went through. I need to take care of them."

"You can do those things as deputy," Sedgestar pointed out.

Frostmask's whiskers twitched wryly.

"Yes, all those things, *and* many more duties and responsibilities," Frostmask said. "It's that second part that's the problem. I'm tired of living my life for others and never for myself. Do I really need to stay ShadowClan's deputy and one day become its leader just to show my loyalty to everyone? *I* know that I belong here, shouldn't that be enough?"

Sedgestar sighed.

"Not every leader wants to lead, you know," he murmured. "Sometimes, a cat must step up if their clan-mates need them. You still have learning to do, but you've been a good deputy. You'd be a good leader."

"I have tried hard to be a good deputy, and I would step up, if that was the case," Frostmask admitted. "But, right now it's not. I know there are several cats in ShadowClan who would be just as good of a deputy as me— if not better— *and* they'd want to do it."

The tip of Frostmask's tail twitched slightly. "And, it's not like I've been perfect either. My position meant that Paledusk was eager to try to manipulate me for his benefit. And, the whole reason WindClan attacked us too is because a 'rogue-blooded' cat is deputy."

"Paledusk is dead and can cause no more harm. And, you should know that I would never bow to Rabbitstar's inane demands," Sedgestar growled, his lip curling up in a faint snarl. "He will

always look for a reason to be upset with us. ShadowClan would never change their deputy because of WindClan's opinion!"

"I know," Frostmask said with a blink. "I'm just saying that if I step down, there might be some benefit for ShadowClan— there's also our clan-mates to think about. I can tell several of them are distrustful of me because of Paledusk and what happened with Dampfang."

"Stepping down won't help with that either," Sedgestar said, his brow furrowed. "It may just solidify their distrust of you."

"Or they'll care less now that I'm not deputy, bossing them around, and they'll regain confidence in you as our leader," Frostmask pointed out. "But, even if their minds aren't changed, I'm not stepping down because of them. I'm doing it for me."

Sedgestar was silent for several more moments, studying her with intent eyes.

"This is truly what you want?" he asked finally.

Frostmask nodded. "It is."

Sedgestar fell quiet again before sighing. Suddenly guilt prickled down Frostmask's spine. Even though she was resolute in her decision, a part of her couldn't help but feel like she was letting her leader, and her whole Clan, down.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, shuffling her paws.

"No. I'm sorry," Sedgestar said, surprising her. "I feel like this is partly my fault. If I had told you the truth— if I'd given you the choice when you were a kit— maybe you would not have grown up feeling such pressure. And, Paledusk certainly would have never dug his claws into you if I hadn't revealed the truth in the worst possible way and drove you to him. This whole situation could have been avoided. I failed you as your leader."

Frostmask shook her head. Although she was grateful for the apology, the ache from Sedgestar's betrayal had faded a while ago.

"No, you've been a good leader to me," she said. "Yesterday, when you told the clan that my meetings with Paledusk were on your orders... You didn't have to do that. Thank you."

"You're welcome. It was the least I could do to try to right this mess," Sedgestar muttered before shaking out his coat as if trying to dislodge the lingering regrets.

He studied her closely a final time.

"Are you sure you want to resign?" he asked. "We could try to be a better team, this time with no secrets."

"I'm sure," Frostmask murmured.

"I thought you would say that," Sedgestar said, shaking his head. "I never imagined that I'd be naming a new deputy again so soon after replacing Grovepelt. He was my deputy for so long that I expected whoever I chose next would be my successor."

Silence fell over them for a beat.

"I'm sorry that I can't be that for ShadowClan... but I do have a suggestion for a cat who could be, if you'd like to hear it," Frostmask offered, her ears pricking hopefully.

Sedgestar surprised her by snorting with amusement.

"I have no doubt you do," he said. "But, I don't need to hear it. I already know your pick for deputy."

Frostmask blinked hard a few times.

"Do you think she's a bad choice?" she asked, her pelt prickling slightly. "Would you have even chosen me if she hadn't been injured when you needed a new deputy?"

Sedgestar shook his head. "There's no use in dwelling on hypotheticals. I need to consider all the candidates for myself, and see who is the best cat for our clan at *this* present moment. I need to pick someone who can both help ShadowClan now, and lead our clan forward after me."

Sighing, Sedgestar lowered himself back down to his nest and curled up.

"Now, leave me be. I need to think about this and try to get some rest," he said, giving a wry flick of his tail. "And, let's both pray that the camp is not attacked tonight, since you are still deputy until dawn."

Frostmask dipped her head to her leader. She exited his den and emerged out in a still peaceful camp. The cats that weren't out night-patrolling had all returned to their dens to sleep.

Frostmask decided to do the same, turning into the nursery and padding inside it with soft foot-falls. Autumnleap mumbled something incoherent as she squeezed between him and their kits, but didn't wake fully. Mistkit and Newtkit were sleeping soundly as well, although they instinctively moved to cuddle against Frostmask's side as she laid next to them.

Frostmask let out a content sigh, lowering her chin down to the mossy nest and closed her eyes.

True to his word, Sedgestar called a clan meeting at dawn. Frostmask had only gotten the chance to tell Autumnleap about the reason for it beforehand. He'd been surprised at her news, but supportive.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he murmured.

His breath stirred her ear fur as they exited the nursery, leaving their kits in Larkfoot's care, and they waited for the rest of their clan-mates to gather. "You know, lots of cats dream of being deputy."

"I'm not 'lots of cats,'" Frostmask responded simply.

Autumnleap purred, rasping his tongue over her forehead.

"I know," he murmured, his gaze full of affection.

Sedgestar cleared his throat once the clan had settled in.

"I'm so pleased to see everyone recovering well," Sedgestar began, nodding down at the camp.

Frostmask glanced around, happy to see that Sedgestar was right. The wounds on her clan-mates' pelts were sealing, and even Lizardstrike was outside the medicine cats' den, sitting with Cedarfur and Yewstorm, who were translating Sedgestar's words to paw-sign for him. Elmclaw had kept Lizardstrike in the den for the past couple of days for observation, but he was looking so much stronger already. Hopefully, he'd soon be released back to normal duties.

"And, I bring more good news about our meeting with ThunderClan and SkyClan yesterday," Sedgestar continued. "We have secured peace agreements from both leaders, and ended our alliance with ThunderClan on amicable terms. Only WindClan remains a thorn in our side, one which— I assure you— will be easily plucked out."

Yowls of support rose up from several warriors; Frostmask recognized Dustleap's and Cedarfur's voices among them. Frostmask had found out yesterday that it had been a WindClan warrior who had killed Hollowshade during the ambush.

At least the peace agreement with SkyClan won't rob Hollowshade's family of their chance at revenge.

"I know these past few days have been very difficult for many of us," Sedgestar continued in a softer, somber voice as the shouts died down. "Not only did we fend off an outside attack, but we faced treachery from within our own ranks as well. But, ShadowClan is resilient. We will heal from this, and grow back even stronger than before. I can't be more proud to call you all my clan-mates."

"ShadowClan!"

Mosspounce had thrown her head back and started the cry, but it swept through the crowd like a wave, their voices defiant and proud. The cry was infectious, and Frostmask was happy to add her voice with the others.

"ShadowClan! ShadowClan!"

Sedgestar's amber gaze was warm as his Clan cheered. He waited for the chanting to naturally fade before he continued again.

"But, I have one more announcement to make today. As you all know, two days ago, Frostmask played a key role in revealing and stopping the danger that both Paledusk and Dampfang posed. She saved us from a great threat, and her bravery will not soon be forgotten."

"Frostmask!" It was Poolcloud this time who began the cheer, but Autumnleap was all too eager to join in, and soon her other friends did too.

"Frostmask! Frostmask!"

Sedgestar's tail swished, but he indulged the cheering again, his expression one of fond exasperation. Frostmask dipped her head, her ears hot as her name echoed through out the camp.

"However, Frostmask and I have spoken," Sedgestar continued once the clan was quiet again. "Due to everything her young kits have experienced over the past few days, Frostmask expressed her wish to spend more time with her family. So, she has decided to step down from her position as deputy."

Now the silence of the camp grew tense and confused.

Poolcloud's mouth dropped open with shock. Lizardstrike whipped his head around to stare at her in surprise. Pineshade's gaze also sought Frostmask's, her brow furrowed and concerned. Redclaw's tail was twitching uneasily, and she whispered something into Weaseltail's ear.

Worried about someone thinking Sedgestar was pressuring her do this, Frostmask rose to her paws to speak for herself, drawing the camp's attention.

"It has been an honor to serve as your deputy for these past few moons," Frostmask said, her voice coming out steady and even. "When Grovepelt retired, I knew that I had big paw-prints to fill. I don't think I could ever have matched him, but still hope I was a

good deputy to you all— even if it wasn't for very long." Frostmask paused for a beat to gather her thoughts. "But, I've never been a very ambitious cat, and after what my kits went through, I can now see my priorities more clearly than before. My family needs more time with me than what I can give them as deputy, and our clan deserves a deputy whose mind and heart are in the role. That is why I am returning to the status of a normal warrior."

Frostmask took a seat to soft mutterings of acceptance from the clan. As she glanced around, she noticed Marshnose watching her with an intense, unreadable gaze. Frostmask stared back.

Is he pleased? He never liked me much as deputy anyway.

...And Dampfang didn't either. If he could see the clan now, he'd be furious that I stepped down as deputy, but only after he'd already been exiled.

She nodded to Marshnose politely, hoping that their relationship could become... if not *friendly,* then at least less antagonistic now that she was no longer deputy— and Dampfang was no longer here to make hostilities worse. In response, Marshnose just narrowed his eyes and looked away.

"So, ShadowClan is once again in need of a new deputy," Sedgestar said, his chin held high. "I say these words before StarClan so that they may hear and approve my choice. Pineshade will be the next deputy of ShadowClan!"

Frostmask's heart leapt with sudden joy.

Yes!

She whipped her head around to look at her friend. Pineshade was staring up at Sedgestar, expression slack with amazement.

"I—" Pineshade stammered, recovering herself as the eyes of the entirety of ShadowClan turned to her. "I accept."

"Pineshade!" Frostmask yowled, springing to her paws.

"Pineshade! Pineshade!" the clan cheered along with her.

Sedgestar scaled down the side of the Clanrock, signaling the end of the meeting. No longer having to hold herself back, Frostmask and Autumnleap rushed forward to be among the first to reach Pineshade's side. Frostmask's tail curled up with happiness as she brushed her muzzle against Pineshade's dark-furred cheek.

"You're going to be such a fantastic deputy!" A deep purr rumbled in Frostmask's throat as she pulled her head back. But then she blinked, feeling a flash of concern as she took in Pineshade's still-stunned expression. "You *do* want to be deputy, don't you?"

"I do..." Pineshade blinked hard a few times, the surprise in her amber eye starting to fade to be replaced with a glimmer of excitement. "It just doesn't feel quite real yet. I didn't even know the position was available until a heartbeat ago!"

"It's going to be so nice that Frostmask isn't going to wake me up every day before dawn anymore when she gets out of the nest," Autumnleap said to his sister, a teasing glint in his eyes. "Now you'll be the one who has to get up early to organize patrols!"

Pineshade's eye narrowed, and she reached up to cuff Autumnleap around the ear.

"As if I won't assign you to every dawn patrol from now until forever," she scoffed.

"That's an abuse of power!" Autumnleap whined, his ears flattening against his head.

Pineshade bared her fangs in a playful snarl. "Keep complaining, and I'll show some real abuse!"

"Who's Autumnleap abusing?" Poolcloud asked, bounding over to give Pineshade's side such an enthusiastic nudge, he almost knocked her off her paws.

"Not me! *Pineshade!"* Autumnleap huffed with offense.

"Get off me, oaf!" Pineshade hissed, straightening and swatting at Poolcloud.

"Oh." Poolcloud nodded to Autumnleap. "That makes more sense."

"You all aren't kits anymore; stop squabbling," Redclaw's voice cut in, both loving and annoyed as she and Weaseltail padded over to congratulate their daughter.

Frostmask stepped back to make room for them. Cricketsong, Dewleaf, Murmurstep, and many others were also eager to greet Pineshade. Frostmask was pleased to see that her friend seemed to be such a popular choice. Even Marshnose dipped his head respectfully towards her.

The crowd quickly parted, however, to allow Sedgestar through. Pineshade straightened to her full height, her amber eye blazing as their leader stopped in front of her.

"You can organize the morning patrols, but meet me in my den afterwards. We have a lot to discuss," Sedgestar said.

Pineshade bowed her head. "Of course, Sedgestar. And, thank you for this honor. I won't let you down!"

Sedgestar purred faintly. "I'm glad to hear it."

The leader turned and padded off, and the crowd began to disperse a bit as well. Autumnleap slipped down into a stretch, reaching his forelimbs long out in front of him as he yawned.

"Well, this has been a lot of excitement for one dawn, but I'll leave the work to you now, Pineshade. I'm going back to sleep in the nursery," Autumnleap said with a purr.

"The nursery?" Pineshade echoed in mock confusion, her head tilting to the side. "Didn't you hear me before? You're on the dawn patrol. Why don't you lead it, in fact. Go down the WindClan border and make sure they haven't crossed it. Claw their ugly muzzles off if they have."

"Dawn patrol?" Autumnleap asked, no longer looking like he was teasing. "But, my kits—"

"Have their mother right there, don't they?" Pineshade pointed her

muzzle towards Frostmask. "Surely she can watch them for the morning."

Frostmask purred, a warm glow building in her chest at the thought of spending the morning worrying about nothing more than Newtkit and Mistkit. Autumnleap deflated some, but perked up a bit again as he caught sight of Frostmask's eager face.

"Alright. You're right," Autumnleap sighed to Pineshade before giving Frostmask's ear a brief lick. "See you later."

"Bye," Frostmask said as Autumnleap went to gather up his patrol members.

With Pineshade in the thick of organizing the other patrols, Frostmask took the chance to slip away and into the nursery. As she stuck her head inside, she saw that all the kits were awake now, their voices clambering over each other as they begged Larkfoot to explain what had just occurred in the meeting. But, as soon as they caught sight of Frostmask, the six kits abandoned the older queen to shoot over to her instead.

"Is it true?!" Mudkit demanded, his brow furrowed. "Larkfoot said you're no longer deputy!"

From behind him, Lichenkit's eyes were as wide as moons as she peered up at Frostmask. Newtkit's tail was twitching anxiously as she stared, and the rest of the kits seemed equally as attentive.

"It's true," Frostmask admitted.

"Why?" Mistkit's ears pinned back with distress. "You were the best deputy!"

"It was my choice to do it. I just... didn't want to be deputy anymore," Frostmask said, trying to explain delicately. "Besides, Pineshade is deputy now, and she'll be just as good as me."

The kits still looked confused, but Sprucekit let out an excited squeak.

"Pineshade?!" she exclaimed. "Really?"

"Yes," Frostmask responded, a purr rumbling in her throat at the starry-eyed look that appeared on Sprucekit's face.

"Once Pineshade is done organizing patrols, you all should go congratulate her," Larkfoot said.

"Yes!" Sprucekit squeaked, haring for the nursery's exit and shooting out of the den, Fogkit and Mudkit hot on her paws.

"Wait! I said *after* she's done!" Larkfoot cried as they dashed off, but it was no use— the three kits were already in the camp clearing, their excited squealing echoing into the den.

Lichenkit was the only sibling that remained in the den, her tail twitching with annoyance as she stared after her disobedient littermates.

Larkfoot sighed. "Come on Lichenkit, let's go stop the rest of them from being underfoot."

Larkfoot padded out of the den, Lichenkit trotting behind her, leaving just Frostmask and her kits. Frostmask stretched across the nest in the center of the den, allowing Newtkit and Mistkit to curl up next to her.

"Why didn't you want to be deputy anymore?" Newtkit asked softly, her eyes wide as she peered up at Frostmask.

"It's just not the place where my heart belonged," Frostmask murmured, brushing her muzzle against Newtkit's side, then Mistkit's.

With a bright, leaf-fall sun shining above, Frostmask laid in the ShadowClan camp clearing with Autumnleap, Dewleaf, and Poolcloud at her side. The four of them sprawled in a pool of light, trying to soak up all the warmth that remained in the season, while their gang of six kits bounced around them.

Frostmask blinked at Mistkit and Newtkit affectionately as they wove around the adults and their older friends. The past few moons had flown by, and her kits had reached the age were they seemed to be all legs, tails, and ears. Their eyes had lost their kitten-blue color

and now shone a rich, brilliant green, like the shade of the evergreen needles in the branches above them. Frostmask could hardly believe how big her kits were— nor how mature Dewleaf's and Poolcloud's litter looked now. The older kits were close to adults in size.

They've all grown up so fast.

"It's got to be soon right? How much longer?" Mudkit asked, bouncing up and down on his toes.

"Still a quarter moon away," Poolcloud said with purr.

"But I want to be six moons old now!" Fogkit said with an impatient growl, his claws flexing.

"Maybe you can talk to Sedgestar and convince him to change the warrior code from apprentices being named at six moons to 'a quarter moon away from six moons,'" Dewleaf said drily.

"Huh. You think I could?" Fogkit asked, his head tilting to the side.

"'A quarter moon away from six moons' doesn't quite have the same snappy ring to it, though, does it?" Autumnleap asked, his eyes glinting with amusement.

"We're *basically* six moons old, though," Sprucekit said, her dark tail lashing with frustration. "Do you think Sedgestar is really keeping track that closely?"

"You were born on the night of a full moon," Poolcloud said. "No matter how hard you try, I don't think you'll be able to trick Sedgestar into believing an extra gathering has gone by."

Sprucekit gave a wordless growl of annoyance.

"We just have to wait like any other kit," Lichenkit broke in, although she also didn't seem pleased at the concept— her tail-tip flicked back and forth. "Besides, at least all of you become proper apprentices as soon as you get your mentors. Elmclaw said that if I want to be his apprentice, it wouldn't be until the next half-moon that I can be presented at the Moonstone!"

Mistkit let out a soft, unhappy mew, drawing the older litters' attention.

"I don't want you all to become apprentices yet!" he exclaimed, his ears twisting back. "Then who will Newtkit and I play with?!"

"Yeah!" Newtkit said, roughly bunting her head into Sprucekit's side. "Don't leave me alone with only *Mistkit!"*

"Yea—! Wait, what?! What's wrong with me?!" Mistkit squeaked.

He sprung at his sister with a playful growl. Sprucekit purred as the pair of them went tumbling away, head-over-tail.

"Don't bite too hard!" Frostmask called after her kits.

"I'm actually not sure that the nursery will be empty for too long after our kits are apprentices," Poolcloud said, turning to Dewleaf, Frostmask, and Autumnleap conspiratorially. "Have you seen how cozy Leafbreeze and Thornheart have looked lately?"

Dewleaf nodded in agreement. "Larkfoot told me that she expects an announcement of kits from them before the next claw-moon."

"Really?" Autumnleap asked, his eyes rounding with surprise. "Thornheart never struck me as the type to settle down with a mate."

"He's not the most obvious with his feelings, but he and Leafbreeze have been close for a while," Frostmask pointed out. "Haven't you noticed?"

Autumnleap's brow furrowed. "I guess not..."

"It's rude to gossip about your clan-mates, you know," Pineshade's voice suddenly cut in.

Frostmask, Autumnleap, Dewleaf, and Poolcloud all glanced over. Frostmask purred in greeting as she saw Pineshade padding back into camp with her patrol of Murmurstep, Mallowpaw, Lizardstrike, and Cedarfur. Each cat held a few pieces of prey in their jaws after their hunt near the WindClan border. Frostmask was pleasantly

surprised that Cedarfur even carried a lizard. It was quite late in leaf-fall to see any reptiles around, but it must have been tempted out by the day's unseasonably warm weather.

For a moment, the thought to ask Pineshade about WindClan— were their patrols still hostile since ShadowClan's retaliation last moon? Or had Rabbitstar finally let his grudge go?— itched in the back of Frostmask's mind. But, she freed the impulse with a soft sigh. She didn't have to worry about things like that as much anymore. She could trust Pineshade and Sedgestar to inform them if anything serious was amiss.

In fact, despite their retaliation against WindClan, this was the most peaceful the forest had been in moons— or perhaps even *seasons*. Even SkyClan and ThunderClan weren't actively fighting right now.

The group of kits rushed to greet the returning warriors. Lizardstrike indulged Mistkit and Newtkit by passing off a freshly caught vole to the pair, while Pineshade relinquished a fat squirrel to Poolcloud and Dewleaf's litter with a purr.

"Why don't you take that to your mother?" Pineshade suggested.

Lichenkit did so as her three littermates rushed after Mallowpaw, entreating her to teach them a new battle move. Not wanting to be left behind, Mistkit and Newtkit abandoned their half-eaten vole to join them, and even Lichenkit followed. As Lizardstrike and Cedarfur carried the rest of the patrol's haul to the fresh-kill pile, Murmurstep and Pineshade lingered nearby, gazing after Mallowpaw and the kits with amusement.

"Can't you lay off us, Pineshade?" Autumnleap groaned, sending Pineshade's gaze flashing from the kits to him. "Don't you have important deputy stuff to attend to? Instead of spending your time scolding us?"

"Oh so the four of you get to lay around all day just because you're parents, but I'm not allowed to spend a moment with my nieces and nephews?" Pineshade shot back.

Autumnleap recoiled as if deeply offended.

"Parenting is not just laying around all day! It's actually a lot of work!" he said.

Pineshade rolled her eye. "But not so much work that you can't indulge a little gossip in other cats' business."

"Tell me, have you— *by chance*— ever heard of the concept of 'fun?'" Autumnleap quipped.

"Murmurstep." Poolcloud turned his attention to her, interrupting as Pineshade growled in response to Autumnleap. "You were Thornheart's apprentice, and you're still friends with him now, right? You can clear this up for us— are he and Leafbreeze mates?"

Murmurstep blinked thoughtfully.

"Yeah, I think they just became official last moon, if I'm remembering correctly," she said. "Neither of them are the type to yowl it from the tree-tops, though."

"Ah-ha, I knew it!" Poolcloud crowed, looking quite pleased with himself.

"Murmurstep, stop encouraging them!" Pineshade hissed, but there was no real bite to her words— in fact, she looked downright fond as the golden warrior padded back over and brushed against her flank with a purr.

As Frostmask gazed at the pair of she-cats, she couldn't help but wonder how long it would take for *them* to officially tell the clan that they were mates. But for Pineshade's sake, Frostmask resisted the urge to ask them about it now, in front of Autumnleap and Poolcloud. Frostmask knew that the two brothers would be unable to stop themselves from teasing Pineshade— no matter how they risked being assigned to every horrible patrol for moons upon moons.

But the next time that I can get Pineshade alone...

Pineshade and Murmurstep decided to join the four of them in lying in their pool of sunshine, and Pineshade and Autumnleap continue to bicker over nothing. The sound was so familiar that their voices

faded into the background in Frostmask's ears as her gaze drifted over the other cats in camp. Her eyes lingered on Lizardstrike briefly as he settled down with Cedarfur to share tongues, before flitting over where Redclaw and Weaseltail were having a meal with Sedgestar and Emberflower, before finally settling on Newtkit and Mistkit. They were still with Sprucekit, Mudkit, Lichenkit, and Fogkit, their brows furrowed with concentration as they mimicked Mallowpaw's movements.

Frostmask shivered as a sudden chilly breeze stirred her coat. She knew that leaf-bare would be coming soon. Already she could sense it in the longer nights, the cooler days, and in the foggy breath that puffed out of their mouths. As with every winter season, ShadowClan would face hard times. But, the thought of the snow and the cold didn't fill her with same trepidation and dread that it used to; not when she knew she'd have these cats beside her— their pelts pressed together, keeping each other warm.

End.